



Fukada Sametarou
ART Sakura Miwabe





I'M GIVING **2**
THE DISGRACED
NOBLE LADY I RESCUED
A **CRASH COURSE** IN
NAUGHTINESS

I'll Spoil Her with Delicacies and Style to Make
Her the Happiest Woman in the World!

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Chapter 1: A Naughty Game of Make-Believe

Charlotte was standing in the garden one sunny summer day, wearing a short-sleeved blouse and a skirt that was a bit on the short side. Though her outfit was light and casual, she had an air of tension about her. She gulped with a serious expression.

“Okay then... Shall we, Roo?” she said in a rigid voice.

“Gawr!” The young Fenrir barked in response. Her deep crimson eyes were shining intently, and her stunning silver fur gleamed in the sunlight. The rare magical beast—that had not too long ago attached herself to Charlotte—sat patiently in front of her, awaiting instruction.

Charlotte took a deep breath and announced, “First off... Shake!”

“Woof!” The Fenrir popped her front paw onto Charlotte’s outstretched hand.

“Now, the other paw!”

“Woof!”

“Sit!”

“Gawr!”

“Down.”

“Woof!”

Roo obeyed every command faithfully. When Charlotte had gone through every move, she ruffled Roo’s head with shining eyes. “Wow! Well done, Roo!”

“Woof woof, woowoof!”

Allen could only look on in admiration at their demonstration.

“You really are a fast learner...”

He flipped a page in the book he was holding, *Introduction to the Art of Magical Beast Taming*. He had acquired the volume the day after they had returned home from their holiday with the Fenrir. The subject of the last chapter was “Let’s train your new beast friend to follow your commands.” Charlotte had read the textbook and mastered everything in only a week. “Well, you managed to understand each other even when you first met, after all. I suppose this is all easy as pie for you.”

“It’s not me, it’s Roo who’s amazing. Here you go, Roo, your treat.” Charlotte gave her a bone as a reward.

“Woof!”

Charlotte had given the Fenrir a name, and the two had already

built a trusting relationship. Hers was an exemplary start as a beast tamer.

Roo happily chomped away on the bone. At first, she had seemed a little lonely away from her mother, but now she was completely at home with them in the mansion.

“Good girl.” Allen stroked Roo’s head. “Hope you’ll keep taking care of Charlotte.”

“Woof!” Roo gave a little bark, narrowing her eyes. Even though she was relaxed around Allen, her attitude toward him was decidedly more stripped-down than toward Charlotte. Roo clearly differentiated between the two of them. Allen felt even more pleased to know what a keen judge of character Roo was.

Charlotte gave him a little bow and smiled. “Thank you so much, Allen, for teaching me so many things.”

“Oh, it’s nothing. It’s a topic I’m interested in anyway,” he replied casually.

On their trip to the Yunoha Zoo of Magical Beasts, Allen and Charlotte had gotten mixed up in a bit of a commotion. It was there that Charlotte’s hidden talent had become apparent. She had the natural gift of a beast tamer—a person who could communicate with any kind of magical beast. In Charlotte’s presence, the Fenrirs and even the Infernal Capybaras, which had a hidden vicious streak, reverently bowed down to her.

The Infernal Capybaras all paid their respects to Charlotte when she and Allen were departing from the zoo. *“Please come visit anytime, Lady Charlotte. We’re all ready to welcome you whenever you’d like.”*

“Yes! I hope you’ll take care too, my friends!”

The Infernal Capybaras had a mild disposition, but they were well-known for being guarded around human beings. Knowing their ways, Allen was truly astonished by their courteous display of affection to her. And when he explained this to her on their way home in the horse-drawn carriage, Charlotte responded with a determined look in her eyes. “So I have the power...to make friends with magical beasts. I wonder how it works? I’d like to learn about it properly.”

“Hm, in that case, I can teach you the basics. I have a fair amount of knowledge in the Study of Magical Beasts.”

“Really?! Please do!”

And so, Allen came to be her teacher. He thought it best not to overwork them at the beginning, so for now, they had a lesson once a day for about an hour, in which he taught her about the special skills of a beast tamer, the various species that existed in the world, and so on.

Charlotte was studious, showing up well prepared for each lesson, and she displayed remarkable progress. Whenever she made a

mistake, she would thoroughly review it afterward and master the answer by the next lesson. She also read different books about magical beasts on her own time. All in all, she was a very dedicated student, and the lessons also felt rewarding to Allen as her teacher.

It's really great that she's found something she's so interested in...

When Allen had taken her in, Charlotte had had no hobbies. But now, she had something she could engage in at will, and she smiled more. He would never have imagined she would transform so much.

Allen flashed a smile as he suggested, "Once Roo's more accustomed to life with us, it would be good to enter beast tamer competitions too."

"Competitions?"

"Uh-huh. They're shows for tamed magical beasts. I bet you'd win first place."

"I-I don't know about first place...but it sounds interesting."

"Woof?"

Charlotte became lost in thought, stroking Roo's head.

At present, Charlotte was a wanted person. Although they saw fewer wanted posters around town, there was still a bounty on her. It would probably be wise to avoid attracting attention, but Allen wanted her to have a big goal to work toward. Either way, it was all up to her. If the occasion arose, Allen would merely set things up for her and give her his full support.

"Anyway, that's something to think about in time. For now, we should celebrate your achievements."

"Oh...celebrate?" Charlotte looked puzzled.

"Woof?"

Allen took her hand and led her to a corner of the garden. Roo trailed along with light steps. And there they found...a small square pool. It was only knee-deep, but cool, clear water was bubbling up from below, and it looked positively refreshing.

"It's going to get even hotter now. I thought we'd better have a swimming pool just for Roo, so I had a go at making one."

The pool not only drew water from an underground water source, it also had a filtering mechanism. It was as clean as drinking water, so Roo could play freely without any worries. When Allen explained this, Charlotte lit up.

"W-Wow! That's wonderful for you, Roo!"

"Woof!" Roo looked happy too. She dipped her front paw in the water and tested the temperature. Then she dove in.

"Go on," Allen said to Charlotte. "Can you go in and check if everything's in order too?"

"Yes!" Charlotte slipped off her shoes and stepped in the pool. Though they were slightly timid playing in the water at first, Roo got

used to it in no time. She rolled around in the pool, then shook herself, sending droplets flying everywhere.

“Hee hee. It’s cold, Roo,” Charlotte giggled.

“Woof!”

The pair looked dazzling as they frolicked about. Allen, watching them from the shade of a tree, murmured, “So peaceful...” He knew it was out of character, but he couldn’t find any other words to describe the scene in front of him. He was idly hoping their life could go on like this forever when Charlotte’s voice called him out of his reverie.

“Allen!”

“Hm?” He looked up to find Charlotte beaming at him.

“I really am grateful. Thank you so much for everything.”

“What are you talking about? I told you, I’m going to teach you all the pleasures of the world. Playing in a pool is trivial.”

“It’s not just the pool,” she giggled, weaving her hands together.

“These days, I can’t wait for morning to come. I’m always looking forward to what fun things you’ll teach me next. Before I met you...I was scared of every day and every night.” A shadow fell over her face for a moment, but she shook it off and broke into a dazzling smile.

“Thank you, Allen. I’m glad I met you.”

“...”

Allen was lost for words. His gaze was sucked into her sparkling smile, and he couldn’t help staring as if engraving her image into his memory. But he came back to himself and shook his head with an awkward smile. “That’s nice, but—Roo’s calling you. Don’t mind me, go play with her.”

Roo tugged her sleeve to get her attention. “Gawr, gawr.”

Charlotte waded deeper into the pool, giving way to Roo’s pestering. “Ah, please Roo, I’m coming.”

Allen could only let out a sigh. “‘I’m glad I met you,’ huh...” He placed a hand over his heart and felt his pulse, which had sped up a little. Then he sighed again.

He’d been feeling strange lately. Whenever he was talking with Charlotte, he would feel his heart make a big leap. His brain would shut down completely, and he’d have to stop whatever it was he was doing. He wouldn’t be able to think about anything else, and he couldn’t fall asleep. When he managed to make her smile, he was elated; when she was sad, he felt like it would tear out his heart. Every word, every gesture from her stirred him up in all directions.

All his life, until now, he had led a life totally devoid of anything even close to romance. He scoffed at other wizards who were distracted by the object of their fancy and neglected their studies, and he had never understood why they would waste their time and energy on such trifling matters.

As these inexplicable phenomena continued in Charlotte's presence, however, even Allen began to suspect what was happening. *Does this mean...I'm in love with Charlotte?* Retrospectively, he had been acting strange from the very beginning. However charitable he might be, it didn't make any sense that he would look after a girl he had never seen before with so much care and interest. But the banal phrase, "love at first sight" would explain away everything that had been puzzling him.

However—he could never fully admit it to himself. *If I become aware of how I feel about her...it'll only be a burden for her.*

Charlotte was finally beginning to change. This was an important period in her life. The most Allen could do at this point was watch over her and stay by her side. If he became conscious of this feeling inside him, he probably wouldn't be able to hold his feelings back. Most likely, he would seize her hands on the spot and shout, "I love you!" And—knowing how kind she was—Charlotte would try to reciprocate his feelings even if she didn't see him that way. And that would be a step back for her, turning her back into a doll without her own will, just as she was taking her own step forward.

That would really be...bad, not naughty. Allen was resolved to teach her all the pleasures in this world—and that was all. He certainly didn't want to do anything to hinder her. Therefore, he decided to suppress his own feelings. He shackled it down, wrapping it many times over in heavy chains, locking it with a key, and hiding it in the depths of his heart.

"Remember, I'm Charlotte's guardian," he muttered to himself. "Even if I like her, it's from the perspective of a father or an older brother, something like that. Making a move is definitely out of the question. If I can't stop myself, I'll kill myself off without further ado. All right, good, that's how it should be."

When he had convinced himself, he looked up at Charlotte again, only to swiftly look away. Her clothes were wet from the water, and he could see through them quite clearly. He could even tell the color of her lingerie, though she herself seemed unaware of it. The feelings that he thought he had just locked away started to break out again. With iron self-discipline, he kicked it back down.

"Charlotte," he said in a quivering voice, "maybe it's time to dry off soon. I know it's summer, but you might catch a cold." Allen snapped his fingers, and a bath towel fell from the empty air right on top of her head.

"Oof!" She smiled warmly. "Yes, I'll do that. Do you want to keep playing, Roo?"

"Wrooo."

"Hee hee. I'll leave you to it then. Take your time."

She sat on the edge of the pool and started drying her hair. Allen sat down next to her. When he dipped his feet in the cool water, his earthly desires melted away.

After a few moment's rest, Charlotte tilted her head and said, "You really do have a big garden. Wouldn't you like to use more of the space?"

"Hm...well, it wouldn't be a bad idea to grow more crops, perhaps."

The garden was ridiculously large, enough to build another mansion. At the moment, however, the only piece of land that was actually in use was the corner where Allen grew various herbs for his potions. Now that he had a bigger family, it could be nice to grow some vegetables.

"But for that, I guess I'd have to do a lot of maintenance," he groaned, casting his eyes around the garden. He had bought the property three years ago, and the weeds were expanding their territory even more than before. He'd have to mow the grass, level the ground, remove the pebbles—an endless list of work to be done. "Well, let's think about that in time. The previous owner doesn't seem to have touched the garden much either."

"Was there someone living here before you, Allen?"

"Yeah. I've never met them, though," he said. "From what I've heard, the previous owner suddenly went missing about thirty years ago."

Charlotte froze at the unsettling word. Oblivious to her reaction, Allen went on, gazing at Roo, who was still enjoying the swimming pool.

Thirty years ago, there had been a peculiar elf living in this mansion. She stayed away from the town and kept to herself. Always busy with some kind of research, she sat at her desk all the time; her papers and pens were her only friends. But one day, she suddenly disappeared. Some said she was devoured by some magical beast that she had created herself. Some said she devised a magic spell to bridge worlds and departed from this one. And some said she fell in love with a human, and the forbidden couple chose to kill themselves.

"With those rumors going around, this mansion was much cheaper than the market price, and—" he paused, finally noticing how pale Charlotte looked. "Uh, hey. You okay?"

She gulped audibly, then murmured timidly, "I-I read about it in a book the other day..."

"About what?"

"Why...haunted houses, of course!"

"Huh?" Allen cocked his head.

Charlotte spouted off, her face still ashen, "People who pass away

with some regrets return as ghosts and haunt their mansion...! And then they curse anyone who sets foot in that house! I-It was a really frightening story...!"

"Ah, you've also been reading popular novels these days."

Charlotte was reading not only books for her studies, but also novels and books on other topics. Since it was a good thing to broaden her world, Allen had been encouraging her, but he hadn't realized exactly what kind of books she was picking up.

"Y-Yes. There were lots of books in the storage room, so... Aren't they your books?"

Allen shook his head. "They probably belong to that elf who disappeared."

"Whaaat?! Wh-What should I do, Allen?" Charlotte was trembling. "I've gone through her things without any permission... Do you think she'll come back as a ghost? Is she mad at me?!"

Allen smiled helplessly at her. "That's impossible. I've lived here for about three years now, but I've never encountered anything like a ghost." When sounds came at night, they were either the wind or some wild animals outside. He'd never witnessed any paranormal activity. "Besides, there's nothing for you to worry about. Even on the off chance that a ghost appears, I'll get rid of it."

"Oh! You can do that to ghosts too, Allen?!"

"Of course. They're only the leftover thoughts of dead people, you know. They don't stand a chance against the living."

Once in a long while, there were reports of ghosts with a deep-rooted grudge so powerful that they could curse the living to their deaths, but he couldn't sense any presence like that in this mansion. Even if a ghost was around, it was probably the harmless type that merely wandered the grounds.

"If you see a ghost, you can call me over. I'll make it vanish in a second," he assured her.

"I-I'd feel a bit sorry for the ghost then..." Charlotte mumbled nervously. It was just like her to feel pity for something she was scared of.

Allen chuckled. "Anyway, no one even knows if she actually died. Races that live a long time like elves often disappear on a whim. Most likely she just got bored of living here."

"I see... That sounds nicer and more peaceful." Charlotte seemed to finally relax.

"Right? So don't worry—"

"Woofff?" Just then, Roo let out a weird yelp. They looked over at the pool to find her holding something in her mouth. She looked concerned.

"What's wrong, Roo?" Charlotte asked.

“Gawr.” Roo threw the thing over to them.

Allen looked down at the strange sphere. “Oh...what’s this?”

It was a perfectly white mushroom about as big as his palm, with a round, ball-shaped cap. When they looked at the pool again, they realized that similar mushrooms were bobbing up and down on the surface of the water. It was a bizarre sight.

“Did the water bring them up from underground? Ah, Roo, careful not to—” Allen was about to tell her not to eat it when something popped up from the ground nearby and a furious shriek rang through the air.

“Whaddaya think you’re doin’?!”

Allen jumped in front of Charlotte to protect her and turned around to find a woman’s head poking out from the ground near the pool. He stared at her, rooted to the spot. At first glance, she looked like she was buried, but there was apparently a trap door leading underground. She had dark skin and silver hair. It wouldn’t have been an exaggeration to say she was a woman of ethereal beauty, but she was wearing thick glasses and an old baggy shirt, and her hair was a mess. She clearly didn’t care about her appearance in the least.

And this woman was inexplicably glaring at Allen and Charlotte as if they were her nemeses. She pointed straight at them and shouted, “Are you the thieves who stole my precious food?!”

“Precious...food...?” Allen could only parrot back her words, still holding the mushroom.



“Phew, sorry to give you a fright there. My apologies.”

“Sure...”

“Um...?” Allen and Charlotte exchanged glances. They didn’t know what to say.

They were now sitting in a basement under the garden. They had climbed down the rope ladder hanging from the trap door into a small room. There was a bookshelf, a bed, and a small writing desk, as well as a simple set of cooking utensils and pots stacked up in one corner of the room. They could even make out another room for growing mushrooms at the back. Magic lamps were glowing all around. Though small, the space looked cozy.

The woman who had invited them in offered them cups with a smile. Her baggy shirt was so stretched from wear that it hung below her bottom. She wasn’t wearing anything underneath, and this choice read as more sloppy than sexy.

“How ’bout a spot of my special mushroom soup, eh? It’s not too bad.”

“Uh, no thank you...” Allen replied.

The cups were brimming with a mysterious liquid that shifted from purple to reddish brown depending on the light. It was emitting a bitter, sour-sweet smell, like fruits that were left out for several days under a scorching hot sun.

Allen was slightly curious how the odorless white mushroom could turn into such a liquid, but he wasn't prepared to taste it to find out. Charlotte quietly averted her eyes too. Roo was waiting for them aboveground. Apparently, she had smelled the peculiar odor wafting from this basement, and she shook her head in grim refusal at the trap door. If he was being honest, Allen didn't want to come down either, but he didn't have a choice.

The stranger in question put away the cups and shrugged. "So...Master Allen, was it? That pool you've made up there carried away my mushrooms. Now, I know you weren't thievin'...but it's a right pain in the ass."

"I apologize for that," Allen said, bowing to her a little. It seemed they had really ruined her stock of food. However, there were other glaring issues to be dealt with. He glared at the woman head-on. "But who the hell are you?"

"Eh? Right, I shoulda introduced myself." She declared proudly, "I'm Dorothea Gri-Mm Wallenstein. Feel free to call me Dorothea!"

"Uh, that's not what I mean... What I want to know is how long you've been living in this basement!" From what he could see, it looked like she had been there for quite a long time. If a suspicious stranger was coming in and out of the grounds, Allen would've sensed it. Now that Charlotte was with him, he was especially alert, but this intruder had appeared out of nowhere. It was impossible not to distrust her. "Don't tell me...you're actually a ghost haunting the mansion?"

"Eep! S-So it was true...?!" Charlotte clung to Allen's arm in fear. His heart almost stopped beating at her sudden touch, but he held himself upright with an iron will.

"Ghost? Whatcha mean?" The woman—Dorothea—looked clueless. She crossed her arms and fell into deep thought. "But...how long, eh? To be honest with you, I haven't a clue."

"What do you mean by that?" Allen asked.

"I just had to get away for a while, so I shut myself up for a looong time. In fact, I wish someone could tell me how long it's been." Dorothea stared at Allen. "And who're you? Why're you here?"

"Well, I live in the mansion above..."

"What?! This is my house! You can't just barge in and settle down!"

"What are you talking about—uh, wait a second." Allen looked closely at the woman's disheveled hair. He noticed that her ears,

partially hidden by her hair, were pointed like a bamboo leaf. She was clearly not human. Those ears could only be... “Are you...the elf who used to live here, and went missing thirty years ago?!”

“What?!” Charlotte exclaimed.

“Thirty...years?” Dorothea looked stunned. She stroked her chin and murmured, “Well I’ll be. It’s been that long already? No wonder things look a bit different outside.”

“B-But...you don’t look any older than Allen, Dorothea!”

“Well, elves age extremely slowly,” Allen said. That was also why their sense of time was completely different from a human’s. For her, thirty years would have gone by in a flash. “Call me crazy, but...have you been living here eating mushrooms for that entire thirty years?”

“Sure. A little fuel can go a long way for us elves,” Dorothea said, as if it was no big deal. “Besides, I’m a dark elf, the elite kind. I can easily live at least a hundred years without eatin’ or drinkin’, just by absorbin’ the magic in the air.”

“A hundred! That’s incredible,” Charlotte said admiringly.

“Well, I’ve certainly heard of elves who can, but still...” In contrast to Charlotte, Allen knitted his brows dubiously.

Elves were creatures who lived with nature. They mainly lived deep in the forest in small communities, and they sometimes soaked up their life force from flora. But they were still organisms, after all. They were vegetarian, but they ate proper meals. Surviving a hundred years without eating or drinking was the kind of feat only an extremely high-ranked elf could pull off. On top of that, dark elves were the rarest of elves. Even Allen had never met one until today.

An elf like that, having to live in hiding for thirty years? What kind of situation was she in? Everything about her smelled fishy.

Unaware of Allen’s suspicions, Dorothea tilted her head and asked, “Hang on, if I’ve been hidin’ for thirty years...do people out there think I’m a missin’ person?”

“Uh...yes, that sums it up...” Allen averted his eyes, realizing something.

If the previous owner of the mansion’s still alive, we could be in serious trouble...! It was the kind of thing that would surely turn into a lawsuit, and they could even be dragged to court. In the worst case, Allen and Charlotte might be kicked out of the house. The real estate agency would likely pay him some compensation, but this wasn’t a matter of money. This mansion was just the right fit for living with Charlotte, who was wanted by the authorities. It was isolated, and there were hardly any visitors. They were finally getting used to life here, and he would feel sorry for her if she had to move so soon. It wouldn’t be wise to build another mansion in the forest either. Charlotte would probably worry over such a big expense. No moving

house, no building a new one. That left Allen one option: negotiating.

“Say, Dorothea. I have something to ask you...”

“What’s that?”

Allen explained in a nutshell and asked her briefly if she would be willing to pass on the mansion.

“Hmmm...” Dorothea contemplated it for a few moments, then simply nodded in assent. “No problem at all. The underground life suits me. You’re welcome to use the mansion as you like.”

“Th-That’s a big help.” Allen was surprised by how easily she gave in. “You can name the price—”

“Nah, I don’t want any money.”

“Huh?” Allen stared wide-eyed, and Charlotte tilted her head in confusion.

Dorothea looked carefully from one to the other, and stroked her chin. “Hmmm, lemme see. A young man who looks like the cocksure bossy type, and a lovely, delicate young girl... Quite an intriguing pair, I’d say. Oh yeah, I’m feelin’ the buzz.”

“What in the world are you talking about?” Allen said.

“Oh nothing, I just thought of askin’ you for a little somethin’ in return, that’s all.” Dorothea looked serious now. “To tell you the truth, I’m in a bit of a pickle. That’s why I’ve been hidin’ for thirty years. If you can help me out, I’ll happily give away the mansion, no strings attached. Whaddaya say?”

“I prefer to just pay you for it, though...” Allen eyed her mistrustfully. Her “pickle” was the sort of trouble to make an elf go into hiding for thirty years. It was bound to be something extremely tedious.

But Charlotte hesitantly tugged at his sleeve. “Um, Allen. It seems Dorothea wants your help...maybe there’s something you could do?”

“There could be...” he replied, still skeptical. “But I’m sure it’s going to be a really complicated problem.”

“I-I’ll help too! I’ll do whatever I can...” Charlotte clenched her fists with a determined look. Apparently, she couldn’t ignore anyone in need.

Allen couldn’t say no when she looked at him so earnestly. He hesitated for a short while, but then he nodded with a sigh. “All right, all right... We’ll hear you out.”

“For real?! Cheers! If Charlotte’s happy to help too, it’s gonna be a breeze!”

“There’s something I can do?”

Dorothea grinned from ear to ear. “In fact, it wouldn’t work at all if you weren’t involved!”

A vague sense of dread came over Allen, and he glared at Dorothea warily. “And? What do you want us to do?”

“Heh heh heh... It’s simple, really.” Dorothea whipped out a notepad and a pen out of nowhere. She pointed the pen at the two of them and declared enthusiastically, “Right then! I want *you*, Master Allen, to go all-out flirting with Miss Charlotte! To help me, the incredibly gifted novelist Dorothea, write my next novel!”

“*What?!*” Both Allen and Charlotte let out a squeal.



“Umm...”

“Hm...”

Allen and Charlotte were sitting side by side on their usual sofa in their usual living room. But, unusually, they were neither drinking tea nor chatting. They were simply sitting in silence, completely frozen. They couldn’t even look at each other. Once in a while, one of them would open their mouth to say something, but think of nothing to say and clam up again. They merely let out meaningless murmurs.

The torturous silence was broken by a vigorous shout. “Cut, cut, CUT!” Dorothea stomped in and berated them. “Didn’t you hear what I said? I asked you to *flirt!* And what do you do? Sit in total silence?! Even a pair who’d just met would talk more freely!”

“Well, easier said than done...right?” Allen looked at Charlotte awkwardly.

“Y-Yes...” she agreed, looking back at him.

In a pool of sunlight nearby, Roo was napping on her favorite blanket. She glanced at them, irritated by the noise, but she quickly closed her eyes again and went back to sleep. Allen envied her with his whole being.

Dorothea crossed her arms and groaned. “Try not to be too self-conscious. Just act like you always do. It’s not like I’m tellin’ you to smooch.”

Charlotte tensed up. “S-Smooch...?!”

Allen’s heart gave a violent thump, but he somehow managed to stay sane. “Uh, um, Dorothea. I think there might be a big misunderstanding...” he murmured slowly, timidly raising his hand. “We’re not...exactly...like *that*, you see.”

“Huh?” Dorothea scowled. She stared at the two, then brightened up in realization. “Righto, so you’re *that* type, are you? Like a slow-burn will-they-won’t-they rom-com, where it’s not one-sided but they just don’t know it yet?”

“S-Slow...?” Allen stuttered.

“Never mind. Just some jargon. Well, well, well, that’s sweet in a different way.” Dorothea scribbled something down in her notepad. It was fine for her to have fun, but it didn’t look like she was writing anything decent.

Looking at Dorothea, Charlotte clapped her hands. “Those books in the storage room...were they written by you, Dorothea?!”

“Oh, you found ’em, eh? Yup, horror, mystery, historical fiction—I was a multigenre writer who could handle anythin’.”

Dorothea narrowed her eyes, looking up with a distant gaze. She slowly told them the story of her life: how she had been inspired by human literature to journey out from the elves’ hamlet by herself, how her first manuscript luckily caught the eye of an editor and was published, and how she had written many more books since then. Then, looking down at her hands, she went on, “But when I tried to write a romance novel, I fell into this gigantic, abyss-level slump. I couldn’t put down a single letter even though my deadline was comin’ up...so I shut myself up in that basement. Ah, brings back memories.”

“Don’t tell me...you were down there for three decades to hide from a *deadline*?!” To call her pathetic would be putting it kindly. Allen threw her a judgmental look, but Dorothea didn’t seem to mind.

“Trust me, if you saw how scary my editor is, you’d get it. Imagine what would’ve happened if I’d shown him my blank manuscript—he woulda sunk me under the sea, no doubt!”

“From my perspective, that would’ve been more helpful...” Allen muttered.

“Ha ha ha, good one, Master Allen. You looked so dark when you said that joke!” Dorothea said, cracking up.

Allen was extremely irritated, but he suppressed his urge to throw her out of the house, since their life at the mansion hung on her whim.

“But now it’s comin’ to an end—time to say good riddance to my writer’s block!” Dorothea barked, pointing straight at Allen and Charlotte. There was a fierce, predatory glint in her eyes. “I felt a lightnin’ bolt of inspiration when I saw you two! No doubt about it, this combination of characters will be the perfect reference for my next book! Well, now you know my story—go on then, flirt away!”

“As I said, we’re not really like that...” Allen grumbled.

“Then you can just act like it! I beg you, pretty please with sugar on top?”

“I don’t know...” He was at a loss. Even if he was ordered to flirt, he didn’t know how to do it, not to mention he had only just locked away his feelings for Charlotte earlier that day. If he stirred them up again, they would probably burst out. And if they did spill out, there would be no turning back.

Just then, he thought of a way out. He placed a hand on Charlotte’s shoulder and said, “No, we must refuse! I’m sure Charlotte wouldn’t want to!”

“Oh! M-Me?”

“Yeah. Pretending to be lovers with a guy you don’t even like...it’s out of the question, isn’t it?” Most women would surely hate that. If his sister Eluka was asked to do such a thing, she would have spat out with a deadpan face, “Huh? There’s no way in hell I’d do that, even if you offered me tons of gold.”

But Charlotte was dazed for a few moments, then she looked down a little. “Umm...I-I wouldn’t mind,” she murmured in a tiny voice.

“See, you heard her—what?” He couldn’t comprehend what she said at first. He turned around very slowly, like a rusty automaton, to look at Charlotte.

There was a faint flush in her cheeks. She lifted her face and looked at him meekly. “I-If it’s with you, I don’t mind at all—”

WHAM!

In one swift motion, Allen slammed his head against the wall as hard as he could.

“Allen?! Are you okay? What happened?!” Charlotte rushed to where he had crumpled to the ground. Startled by the noise, Roo shot up and gave a testy bark.

“Ah...sorry. I nearly lost my reason, so I took some emergency measures.”

“But how... Your forehead is all red!”

“Oh, uh, yeah. No problem. I’m fine.” Thanks to the impact, he had regained a little bit of his composure, but since Charlotte was peering into his face anxiously, his heart was still pounding. His whole body felt like it could burst into flames, and his breathing grew extremely ragged.

The feelings that he was supposed to have locked away were in danger of overflowing any second. *This is bad! Not even an emergency measure can stop it...!* At this rate, it wouldn’t help to stop his heart either. He writhed in agony inside, unable to do anything about his predicament.

“Woo-hoo!” Dorothea cheered. “I knew it! My rom-com gold sensor never lies! Such a fresh and innocent rom-com unfoldin’ before my very eyes! This is priceless!”

With gleeful exclamations, she furiously scribbled in her notepad. She looked like she was having the time of her life. Allen felt a strong urge to strangle her, but he steeled himself. Once she had scrawled down enough notes, she looked up at Allen and smirked. “So, it appears Miss Charlotte is willin’. What about you, Master Allen?”

“What are you getting at?”

“I mean, puttin’ on an act as make-believe lovers. Don’t you wanna?” Dorothea asked, grinning ear to ear.

Allen pursed his lips at her question. It was a dirty trap. It was

clear that if he said he didn't want to, Charlotte would be hurt. But he was reluctant to assert that he did want to pretend to be her lover. The moment he uttered those words, there would be no turning back. After vacillating for a while, he murmured, "Hmph, in that case..." Bracing himself, he smiled cheerfully at Charlotte. "I suppose...playing make-believe games like this and going back to childhood is also a naughty pleasure!"

"R-Really?" Charlotte asked.

"Of course it is! So let's give it a try! I have no ulterior motives, since it's only a game, after all. Come at me!"

Dorothea clicked her tongue and muttered, "I dunno what you're on about, but I feel like you've found a loophole..."

Allen felt safe for now, and breathed a sigh of relief. *Now I can just go with the flow... I mean, it's probably impossible for us to pretend to be lovers anyway...* Though Charlotte didn't seem to mind the game, she was still as tense as before. Neither of them would be able to make a move, even if they both knew they were pretending. If she did take the initiative, however, he couldn't imagine what would happen to him. In any case, he would try to behave just as he normally did.

Just as he had come to that resolution, Dorothea said casually, "That settles it, then. From now on, I'll give you the cues, so you can flirt just as I tell you to."

"What?!" Allen was thunderstruck.

But Dorothea went on breezily, "Well, whadja expect? If I waited for *you two* to start flirtin' on your own, even an elf like me would wither and die of old age."

"Even an elf, the species most known for longevity?! Are we that bad?!" Allen wanted to believe that, given some more years, he could eventually do something about his crush, at least a little.

But for now, this scenario was no good. He thought he'd avoided a catastrophe as he'd assumed that neither of them would be able to make a move themselves. If Dorothea stepped in with instructions, they were surely headed for disaster. *But if I don't listen to her, she might kick us out of the mansion...*

Sacrifices had to be made. Though it broke him to do so, he nodded in acquiescence. "Fine... I'll follow your orders. But on one condition!" He stepped in between Dorothea and Charlotte, and pointed straight at the elf. "I refuse to do anything that goes against public order and standards of morality! I'll give my life to protect Charlotte's dignity!"

"Don't you worry, my theme for the next book's 'pure love.' I'm not gonna say anything coarse," Dorothea laughed. Allen felt nothing but mistrust. Ignoring his icy look, she said, "First things first, why don't we fix the settin'. Lemme see. What's your relation to each other

anyhow?"

"Well, we're supposed to be an employer and his servant..." Allen gave her a summary of the events of the past two months, leaving out the incriminating details.

During his explanation, Dorothea murmured, "Livin' under one roof...? Why hasn't anything happened yet? Folks these days, they must be barkin' mad..." But Allen pretended not to hear her ridiculous complaint.

When he was done, Dorothea crossed her arms and mulled over things, then looked up. "Well then, here's what we can do. Let's say after goin' through some twists and turns, you've just started seein' each other three days ago."

"Right..." Allen sighed.

"Three days ago?" Charlotte said.

"Now now, take a seat and listen."

They sat side by side on the sofa as Dorothea directed. Now they were back to square one. Standing behind them as they exchanged confused looks, Dorothea reeled off the setting as if she was reciting a poem. "Here's the crucial part—the backstory. You two have fancied each other for a while. But you weren't brave enough to do anythin' about it, and you've kept your feelings to yourself."

"Brave enough..." Allen felt a twinge at Dorothea's words. He had locked away his feelings for Charlotte. He had chosen to do so for Charlotte's sake—but was that really the whole reason? Wasn't he simply being a coward? His own heart was a mystery to him.

"And one day, Miss Charlotte gets involved in an incident, and she's abducted right in front of your eyes, Master Allen."

"What?!"

"Wh-What's going to happen to me?"

Dorothea continued, "Of course, Master Allen will rescue you. But he has to overcome one obstacle after another..." Urged on by Charlotte, Dorothea dove into a tale of adventures that was so dramatic it was hard to believe she had just made it up on the spot. Even Allen was drawn into the story in spite of himself. And at last, the tale was drawing to a close. "So that's how Master Allen comes to realize again how deeply he feels about Miss Charlotte. He saves her and confesses his true feelings to her, and they're happily united. That's the long and the short of it!"

"Happily..."

"U-United..."

They were both under the spell of the novelist. Allen felt as if he had actually gone on such an adventure and that he had made a successful confession of love. Charlotte was also frozen in place, her face turning a bright red.

“And now, it’s three days after that! After all the hurly-burly, you can finally sit down together and have a slow, intimate moment.”

“What a setting...” Allen mumbled. Just hearing about it made him blush. *What’s she going to make us do in such a nerve-racking scene?* There was no doubt that his heart would actually explode if she told him to whisper sweet nothings to Charlotte or tell her how much he loved her. He opened his mouth to speak, bracing himself for the fatal blow. “And...what do you want us to do?”

“Isn’t it obvious? Keepin’ in mind the whole context...” Dorothea said, smiling widely, “I want you to hold hands and gaze into each other’s eyes.”

“Huh? Hold hands? Is that all?” Allen asked.

“Yup! Let’s start from there!” Dorothea nodded decisively.

“Oh, um...really?!” Charlotte looked flustered, but Allen sighed in relief.

Holding hands and making eye contact as they talked—those were the sort of things they’d done countless times before. *Hunh. For such a grand preamble, it’s a pretty simple request.* He didn’t hesitate at all to put it into action. “All right then, let’s get it over with.” He gently took Charlotte’s hand.

“Oh!”

Her warm, slender fingers fit right into his palm. He felt a little shy, but he could endure this level of intimacy. The feelings he had locked away inside him like Pandora’s box were still secure. He had been carefree about it until...

“Come on, you can look at me, Charlo—” The moment he peered at her, he froze completely.

“Umm...” Charlotte was gazing at him, blushing deeply. Her big, widened eyes looked misty, and they shone even more than usual, catching the light from the window.

A sigh, sweet and hot, escaped from her soft lips. When her breath caressed his cheek, Allen’s heart started racing even faster. All the heat in his body rushed to his face, and he turned even redder than Charlotte. His hand was trembling a little from being nervous, and he couldn’t think straight anymore.

“See?” Dorothea stood in front of the sofa, smirking like the devil. “Remember the context, you’ve discovered your love for each other already. Just holdin’ hands hits different, eh?” She looked at Allen. “So, Master Allen. How do you feel?”

“Uh, well...” They were only holding hands and looking into each other’s eyes, nothing more. But he was overcome with a rush of euphoric bliss that nearly swept away all his capacity to think. “It’s...not bad.”

“Mm-mmm! Good reaction! And what say you, Miss Charlotte?”

“Oh, um...well, umm...” Charlotte murmured, still blushing. Looking up at Allen, almost teary, she squeezed out an answer in a faint voice. “M-My heart is racing...”

Allen felt like he was struck by lightning. She was adorable. He loved her. He wanted to embrace her then and there. Feelings he’d never imagined he’d ever have gushed out. *I just...can't do it anymore!!!* He shouted in his head, finally resigning himself to the rush of emotions that should have been locked but was now bursting out of its box. The lid fell off so easily, and his emotions overflowed. It streamed out like a flood to wash away everything in the world.

At long last, Allen admitted to himself that he was, irrefutably, in love with Charlotte. Overcome by the torrent of emotions, he gazed helplessly at Charlotte.

“Woo-hoo, is it gettin’ hot in here or what! Could you elaborate, Miss Charlotte? How does that feel exactly?” Dorothea prompted.

“U-Um...I’m not sure how to put it, but...” Charlotte murmured honestly. “I’ve only ever felt my heart beating fast like this when I was scared...but this is a warm, happy kind of racing...I think.”

“Wahey! That’s brilliant! I’ll take it, thank you very much! With content like this, I’m sure my manuscript will go straight to proofs!”

“R-Really? I’m not sure what I did...but I’m glad I could help.” Charlotte gave a soft smile.

Her smile pierced through Allen’s heart. Though her life before now had hardly been fortunate, she still had the heart to smile for other people so sincerely. He deeply admired such strength in her. Now that he’d admitted his feelings to himself, his love knew no bounds. He loved her voice. He loved her smile. He loved her small hands. The time they spent together, the words they exchanged, the comfortable silences they shared—everything felt so dear to him.

Charlotte had said her heart started racing when she held hands with him. He felt exactly the same way. His heart was pounding, and it felt like it would explode. Didn’t that mean...Charlotte felt the same way about him? *If she likes me too, there’s no need to hold back... Shouldn’t I just go ahead and tell her?!*

He had suppressed his own feelings because he’d thought it would only be a burden to her, but if she felt the same way—if she really did think fondly of him—there was no obstacle anymore.

“Prudence” and “cautiousness” didn’t exist in his dictionary. Once he set his mind on something, he took immediate action. And once he decided to do something, he went all the way. That was the kind of man Allen Crawford was.

“Charlotte!”

“Oh!” Charlotte jumped at his sudden outburst. She noticed his earnest expression and tilted her head. “U-Um...what is it, Allen?”

“There’s something important I have to tell you. Listen to me. Charlotte, I—”

Just when he was about to throw a curveball, there was a tremendous crash. A cloud of dust filled the living room, and Allen’s once-in-a-lifetime confession was interrupted. He hacked in the dust and stuttered, “Wh-What the—?!” He hugged Charlotte close to protect her and turned to look toward the explosion.

There was an enormous hole in the wall of the house. A stranger stood in the sunlight streaming in. He was a young man in a black suit, with slick, smooth hair and a sullen face.

The stranger courteously bowed to Allen and Charlotte, who were gaping at him. “I detected a presence and came straightaway. Please excuse me for my sudden visit.”

“Huh...?” Allen and Charlotte could only blink.

But Dorothea had a completely different reaction. “H-H-He’s here!” she shrieked and tried to flee lightning fast, but the man circled around to her and felled her with one karate chop.

“Not so fast.” He pulled out a rope and started tying her up. He was quick and efficient, like he had done this a thousand times before. It was clearly a confrontation, but Allen was too stunned to do anything to help. The stranger looked down at Dorothea, now rolling on the floor like a caterpillar, and said coolly, “How are you, Ms. Dorothea? It’s been a while—thirty years, four months, and ten days, to be precise.”

“Uh, well...yup...” Dorothea sheepishly muttered. “How’ve you been, Yoru?”

“What can I say? Imagine my surprise when you disappeared the day after I urged you to send me your manuscript. Letting you get away was the greatest mistake of my life as your lead editor.” He gave a weary, exaggerated shrug, but not a muscle in his face moved. “I combed all the elven hamlets, but I’ll admit your own mansion was a blind spot.”

“Heh heh... I put an extra tight spell on my secret spot underground. Not even the greatest coulda caught my scent! Did I impress you?!”

“If you could expend half that effort into writing your manuscript, I wouldn’t have had to waste my time these last thirty years.”

“Ahhh! I’m sorry! I’m so sorry!” Dorothea burst into tears. She’d clearly brought it on herself, so Allen didn’t feel a speck of pity.

“I apologize for the disturbance. Please accept this money for mending your wall.” The man handed Allen a thick envelope.

“Okay...”

Then the editor lifted Dorothea over his shoulder. He looked like a kidnapper caught in the act. Dorothea screeched for help.



“Aieeee! Please help, Master Allen! He’s gonna drown me in the sea!”

“Why would I do such a thing to my valuable novelist?”

Dorothea stopped squirming for a moment. “Oh! For real?! Wow, you’ve gotten quite a bit softer in thirty years, Yoru—”

“The sea would be too easy. We shall begin with a volcano.”

“I’d die!!! Even an elf would die in magma!” she screeched, starting to resist again.

“Ha ha ha. Shouldn’t a novelist have all kinds of experiences?”

“How would a near-death experience in a volcano help my romance novel?!”

The man vanished through the gaping hole, with Dorothea howling on his back. A few seconds later, they saw a giant black dragon fly away into the distance, holding the elf in his mouth.

Silence fell on the living room. Allen was still stunned when he heard a soft voice next to him. “Uh, um...Allen...”

“Oh...uh, yes. Sorry.” He awkwardly let go of her, realizing he had been hugging her close the whole time.

Her cheeks flushed, Charlotte sat dazed for a little while, but then she remembered something. “Umm...what were you about to say?”

“Ah...never mind.” Even Allen couldn’t say it in such a situation. He took a deep breath and covered his face. He felt utterly exhausted, but not at all hopeless. Though his attempt at confessing his love had failed this time, there would be many more opportunities. *In fact, it was for the best that I got interrupted. I don’t want to say it on the spur of the moment... I want to prepare for it properly.* He would tell her when they were somewhere romantic. With a heartfelt gift. And words that would enchant her. Allen resolved to make his confession a triumph.

“Hey, Charlotte.”

“Yes?”

“I’m going to do it. So...hope you’ll wait for me for a little while,” he said earnestly.

“S-Sure... I understand?” Charlotte looked back quizzically at Allen, wondering what it was all about.

Chapter 2: Something Bad, and a Naughty Confession

Allen, Charlotte, and Roo were visiting the adventurers' guild in the city. The spacious hall thronged with people—adventurers who had returned from dungeons, or were looking for work, or were having the materials they'd seized from monsters assessed, and so on. There was also a bar at the back, which was more than ready to suck up all the adventurers' earnings.

"Wow...they all look so powerful," Charlotte remarked curiously. Her hair, of course, had been turned black as a disguise.

"Gawr." Roo looked around warily.

Allen had come here several times before, but this was the first time he'd brought them along. He was looking at his companions fondly when he heard a voice from the bar.

"Oh hey, Dark Overlord."

Allen turned to find a row of familiar faces: members of the Grotto led by Magus, and the Serpent's Fangs led by Groh, about thirty men in total. They were the thugs that Allen had beaten to a pulp when there were some happenings in the town.

"Hm? Ah, it's you lot," said Allen.

Magus of the Rock People raised a hand in greeting—he was sitting on the floor, possibly because he was much bigger than a human—and Groh, with his pet viper wrapped around his neck, did the same. The rest of the thugs took one look at Allen, jumped to their feet, and bowed.

"Hello, sir! We're at your disposal, sir!" they shouted. "How is our dear goddess today?"

"You're looking as beautiful as always—oh! Is that...a Fenrir?!" One of them noticed Roo and exclaimed.

His shout drew everyone's attention. Charlotte cowered at the men's looks and hid behind Allen, and Roo growled threateningly. Allen patted Roo's head and shrugged. "She's a friend of Charlotte's. We came here to get a permit so she can accompany her in the city."

Beast tamers weren't allowed to just bring whatever magical beasts they befriended to the city. If a half-tamed creature came into town, there was a risk of a catastrophe. To ensure that the beast would be safe in public, the beast tamer had to bring their beast to the adventurer's guild and take an examination to check whether the

beast posed any threats, whether it obeyed all of its master's orders, and so on. Only then could the beast tamer get a permit to have the creature accompany them.

"S-Since when did she make friends with a scary beast like that..." the men gaped. "Amazing as always, our goddess!"

"I-It's nothing." Charlotte smiled sheepishly. She seemed a little less frightened now.

Allen pointed toward the relevant counter at the other end of the hall. "Look, that's the counter. I've already informed them that you're coming, so go ahead."

"Y-Yes. I'll do my best. Let's go, Roo."

"Gawr gawr!"

They eagerly strode toward the counter as the other people around them watched with interest. The test was quite thorough, and it would take about an hour, but it wouldn't be a problem for Charlotte and Roo. Allen saw them off and was about to leave, but Magus stopped him.

"Wait up, that means you've got nothing to do now, right, Dark Overlord?"

"Let's have a drink once in a while!"

Allen frowned. "It's the middle of the day..." He had been planning to pop into a bookshop while he waited, but he changed his mind. "Well, maybe it's not a bad idea to ask you for your opinions." Allen sat down next to Magus.

"Ooh, that's not like you. Opinions about what?" Magus asked. The group crowded around him, eager to hear the story. Allen had ordered them around and beaten them up under the guise of training before, but not even once had he asked them for their opinion. No wonder their curiosity was piqued.

"Well. It's not a big deal." He sipped the cheap drink they poured for him and asked casually, "I'm actually thinking of making a confession to Charlotte soon, so what kind of scenario do you think would go well?"

RATTLE-BANG-SMASH!!! The table broke in two, bottles flew in the air, and the pack of thugs toppled over all at once.

Allen widened his eyes a little at the sudden commotion. "What's gotten into you? Are you that drunk already? That's no good—you can drink alcohol, but don't let it drown you."

Magus, who had fallen over in shock and cracked the table on his way down, hurled a sharp retort. "Oh we're sober now! Like you poured a bucket of cold water over us!" The others tottered back to their feet and looked at Allen with a fearful expression.

"Uh, I'd just like to ask to clarify..." Groh began timidly as he tried to comfort his snake, which was also gawking at Allen, "what kind of

confession do you mean exactly?"

"Of course, a confession of love—what else?"

"H-He's so blasé now...!"

Everyone cleaned up the mess around them, then turned back to Allen. Though Allen had used his pocket money to get new drinks for everyone, no one took a sip. Every one of them was completely silent, and they sat around him like they were at a wake.

Allen knitted his brows and glared at the pack. "What is it? Do you have a problem with me confiding in Charlotte?"

"Not really a problem, but..." Magus and Groh looked at each other solemnly.

"We just didn't really expect this turn of events..."

Their followers were whispering among themselves too. "Hey...did anyone bet on it happening this early?" "No, I have a feeling the shortest bet was three years." "And I put all my money on the big hit, 'Ten years in, he'll make a move on her on the spur of the moment and take responsibility for it'..."

"I'll get you all for this later," Allen grumbled. If he was honest, he would have preferred to give them their comeuppance then and there, but since he still wanted to hear their thoughts, he put that aside for now.

Magus covered his face with his hands and keeled back. "But man, I'm in shock. Honestly, I thought you'd go on without realizing it yourself."

"What in the world made you change?" Groh asked.

"Well, uh...things happened." Allen couldn't tell them it was only because they had held hands and looked into each other's eyes—partly because he was embarrassed, and partly because he had a feeling they would destroy more tables. "Regardless, I'm going to tell Charlotte how I feel. None of you look like you've had anything to do with love affairs, but a bad bush is better than the open field, as they say. Come on, I know it's empty in there, but rack your brains and try to give me some advice."

"You don't know how to ask favors, do you... Well, that's nothing new," Magus laughed wryly.

But Groh was pursing his lips with a scowl.

"What, Groh? You look like you want to say something," Allen asked.

"I don't know much about it," Groh muttered with a sigh, and glared at Allen. "But to get straight to the point, our dear goddess has some complicated troubles. And you've been sheltering her, knowing her situation. Is that right?"

"Exactly," Allen admitted honestly.

The others shifted uncomfortably, averting their eyes. Groh and

Magus might be degenerates, but they were adventurers, after all. They would have seen the numerous wanted posters put up in the guild, including Charlotte's. They couldn't have missed it, and even with her hair dyed with a magic spell, they must have realized who she was. Nevertheless, none of them had tried to talk about her past or capture her at all. On the contrary, her wanted posters around town had steadily decreased. Allen had gotten rid of some of them in secret, but far more had disappeared without his doing. He'd been vaguely aware of that, but he hadn't looked into who was behind it.

In effect, Groh had broken their unspoken understanding not to mention anything relating to Charlotte's troubles. Still glaring at Allen, he went on, "And making a move on a woman like that? What choice would she have? Wouldn't it amount to taking advantage of your position?"

"H-Hey, Groh. That's going a bit too far," Magus cut in hastily. "He's tyrannical as hell, but...he's a good guy when it comes to the young lady. He's not like that."

"You think I don't know that?" Groh spat out. "But I can't *not* say it." He clicked his tongue and turned away.

A hush fell over them for a few moments.

"Hmph. That's a reasonable comment," Allen said. "From a bystander's perspective, I'm sure I look like a dirty, good-for-nothing man."

"Then...are you going to let her be?" Groh asked.

"Course not!" Allen declared with a sneer. Naturally, he had had the same worries as Groh already. In her position, Charlotte wouldn't be able to refuse Allen's advances. She would likely try to act the part of a lover to satisfy his wishes. But Allen was determined all the more because of that. "I'm going to make her happy no matter what. I'll make her so happy that she'll forget about those trivial things like her position or the shackles she might feel." He was prepared to devote his whole life to her. He would eradicate any obstacles and make her the happiest woman in the world.

"If she can't accept me even then," he went on, "I'll back down quietly." He could detect a lie in anyone. However Charlotte might try to pretend otherwise, her true feelings would be clear as day to him. If that was the case, he'd give up completely. Distressing her was the last thing he wanted to do. All he wanted was to make her happy. "Even if she doesn't choose me, I'd be content as long as she's happy, and—"

"Stop, say no more." Groh put up a hand to interrupt Allen. Then he buried his face in his hands and slowly shook his head. "I get everything you want to say, so please...spare us..."

"Hm? But I haven't said nearly enough."

"Forget it, Groh." Magus placed a hand on Groh's shoulder and

turned a lukewarm gaze at Allen. "He's high from his first love... Better not provoke him, or it's only gonna burn us."

"How'd you know this was my first love?"

"How would I not?" Magus rejoined, deadpan.

The thugs around them, who had been listening in, had their heads in their hands too, for some reason Allen couldn't fathom.

"Damn, what are we being subjected to?" one groaned.

"Just don't think about it. Protect your brains with alcohol."

"Ugh...I've never drank anything so tasteless..." another sobbed.

All of them began to down their drink as if they were racing. They seemed desperate to drown their sorrows in alcohol.

Allen looked around at the group, who looked like they were going through some emotional turmoil, and let out a sigh. "So you've known who she is all this time."

"Well...the portrait on the wanted poster was pretty accurate, and she didn't change her name," Groh mumbled with a nod, and the others murmured in agreement. Groh immediately followed up with a dry smile. "But we don't believe those stories. So we decided to keep quiet."

"Appreciate it." Allen bowed slightly. Unusually for him, he was moved. *Now there's so many more people...who believe in her.* And that was all her own doing. He was deeply impressed to witness how much her world had expanded. Then he thought of something and cocked his head. "But if you're all so attached to her, aren't you going to stop me from making advances?"

"It's not like that for us. We're more like fans of an idol or something, I dunno..."

"We're helpless against the Dark Overlord in the first place..."

"And besides, she's totally out of our league..."

The group threw him looks that were slightly tinged with resentment. Nonetheless, it lifted his spirits, and he nodded confidently, "That's good to hear. Saves me the trouble of exterminating familiar faces."

"I can't take this guy."

"Scuse me, can we get more drinks over here? The strongest one in the bar, please."

Drinks were flowing, and it was finally starting to look like a proper drinking party. Allen also had a cup or two, and with the push of alcohol, he raised the subject again. "So, back to the question. Does anyone know of a good place to make my confession? Or a gift that she might like?"

"A gift, huh..." The group pondered it. "Girls like flowers and jewelry, don't they?"

"Flowers maybe, but I'm not sure if Charlotte would be that happy

with jewelry..." Allen said. Anything too expensive might make her anxious. Something like that hair ornament he had once bought for her from a street vendor might delight her more. She still wore it every day. He'd have to mull it over, so he decided to postpone getting the gift for now.

"Oh, I know a good place, though," Magus piped up.

"Hm? Let me hear it."

"There's a dungeon up northwest from here called Cave Toor, and a flower meadow on the way there."

"Ah, that one." Groh and his men looked at each other, nodding in agreement.

According to them, Toor was an incredibly difficult dungeon. Adventurers who were confident enough ventured into the cave to train themselves and hunt down magical beasts to earn some spending money. And on the way to that cave from the city, there was a small knoll. In this season, it was covered in vibrant flowers, and wild hares hopped around. Since there was a dungeon nearby, ordinary people rarely went there, but it was known to be a peaceful spot where magical beasts wouldn't usually appear.

Allen pictured the scene and slapped his knee. "Sounds pretty good. The kind of place Charlotte would like."

"Right?" Magus agreed. "You can take her out, say it's a picnic or something."

With the help of alcohol, Allen and the burly men talked excitedly about romantic date scenarios. It was a bizarre gathering. Other patrons watched them dubiously from a distance.

They started to figure out the details of the excursion. Allen would invite her out to the flower field, where they would enjoy the wonderful scenery. Then at sunset, Allen would tell her how he felt about her. Even Allen, who had no clue about such matters, could tell that the plan was very romantic.

Thanks to the plan, along with the drinks, his excitement shot up. He leaped to his feet, thrust his fist high into the air, and barked, "All right! Now that it's settled, I'm gonna go for it tomorrow! I'm gonna do it! There's no going back!"

"Woop woop!" "We're rooting for you!" "Go ahead and be a happy couple already!" The pack whistled and cheered for Allen. Everyone was at a fever pitch now. None of them noticed there was someone approaching them.

"What's everyone talking about?" A voice said from behind.

"Whoa?!" A strangled yelp escaped from all the men. When they nervously turned around, Charlotte was looking at them. Allen couldn't help but gulp.

"Ch-Charlotte... You finished your test already?"

Charlotte smiled proudly. "Yes! Roo was a very good girl."

"Woof!" Roo looked pleased, showing off the white scarf wrapped around her neck. It was attached by a pin with a magic stone ornament: the proof that she was officially approved by the guild.

"Th-That's great. By the way..." Allen peered into Charlotte's eyes and asked in a low tone. "Did you...hear what we were saying?"

"No, I didn't catch anything...was it something important?"

Allen breathed a sigh of relief. "Oh, not at all! Just weather, politics, boring stuff like that!" He wanted to be fully prepared to tell her properly, and it would all be ruined if she found out like that. He put several gold coins on the table to pay for the drinks and urged Charlotte toward the exit. "Well then, why don't we celebrate you passing the exam? How about treating Roo to some steak?"

"B-But weren't you still talking with everyone?"

"Don't worry about it, little lady," Magus said.

"What he said, dear goddess. You go ahead and give your Fenrir friend a treat," Groh added.

"Are you sure? Hee hee, shall we follow their advice then, Roo?"

"Gawrrr," Roo rumbled happily, and Charlotte smiled in return. The two of them, accompanied by Allen, left the guild.

Magus, Groh, and the gang saw them off with somewhat warm gazes. When the trio disappeared around the corner, they let out a collective sigh.

"I'm still in shock. Never thought he'd decide to go in that direction..."

"Just goes to show, humans have infinite possibilities..."

The two exchanged thoughtful remarks like children watching their widowed father getting married for the second time. Somehow they felt warm and wholesome inside.

But their peace was soon cut off by a sudden uproar. Someone banged open the doors to the guild and shrieked, "Help! Is anyone here skilled at healing magic?!"

A heavily armored female adventurer and a male adventurer tumbled into the hall. The man was leaning on the woman's shoulder, wounded all over and gasping for breath. His armor was completely tattered, and his sword was snapped in half.

Healers rushed forward to help them. Others looked on and murmured to each other with worried glances.

"Must be the monster at Cave Toor again..."

"Looks like..."

"It was already a tough dungeon to begin with, but didn't some crazy vicious beast settle there recently?"

"Yeah, that's what I heard. They pulled up the rank from C plus to A minus."

Needless to say, the onlookers' conversation also reached the ears of Magus and the rest of their group.

"Hey...did you know about that?" They looked at each other with grave expressions. "No..." Lately, they had been so busy with part-time jobs and volunteering work that they'd hardly had any time for their main profession as adventurers. Of course, none of them had heard that things had gotten so dangerous around Cave Toor.

Everyone was silent for a while, but eventually, they concluded, "Well, he's the Dark Overlord. He should be all right." "Yeah, I bet." And they soon went back to drinking.

Not one of them heard the battered adventurer's delirious muttering. If even one had heard the words he murmured, they would have gone paler and chased after Allen to try to convince him to reconsider his plans for the next day.

The wounded adventurer, who had a footprint larger than a dog's engraved firmly on his cheek, groaned as he received urgent care from the healers. "Ack...what the hell...was an Infernal Capybara doing there..."



The bright summer day was perfect for a picnic.

Charlotte gasped in admiration. "Wow, it's such a beautiful place."

"Gawr!" Roo was also in high spirits, standing next to Charlotte.

Allen, Charlotte, and Roo were visiting a nameless hill near Cave Toor. Flowers blooming in all kinds of colors filled the scenery, and countless butterflies fluttered through the air. Not a single cloud floated in the deep blue sky, and a gentle breeze swayed the grass.

Charlotte was wearing a white sundress and a straw hat to protect her from the fierce sun. Since there was no one around, she didn't need to be in disguise, and her natural blonde hair suited her outfit exceedingly well.

She turned around, stroking Roo's head. "Thank you so much, Allen, for bringing us to such a wonderful place—oh?" She paused and widened her eyes in surprise. A few meters away, Allen was standing stock-still, burying his face in his hands. Charlotte approached him timidly. "Umm...is anything wrong?"

Allen's head snapped up. "Huh?!" His eyes met hers in close proximity, and his heart did a somersault.

Unaware of Allen's internal turmoil, Charlotte tilted her head anxiously. "Are you okay, Allen? You look a little pale..."

"Oh, uh, yeah. No problem." Allen waved his hands and cracked an awkward smile. But his eyes were bloodshot and his face looked pasty. A zombie would've looked healthier.

Charlotte frowned and peered into his face. "Maybe you've caught

a cold? Do you have a fever? Please excuse me..."

Charlotte laid a gentle hand on Allen's forehead. He could feel the warmth of her slender fingers, and he broke out in a full-body sweat. Her face was so close. Her beautiful eyes, as clear as jewels, were right in front of him. Her sweet aroma tickled his senses, and his head was filled with one thought and one thought only: *I love you.*

He hastily jumped away, swallowing back the words. "I-I'm all right! Just a bit sleepless!" He mumbled some excuses to Charlotte, who looked at him in surprise. "Uh, I couldn't sleep well last night... I should feel better if I take a little nap."

"Are you sure? Please don't push yourself too hard."

"Don't worry. Why don't you go take a walk with Roo?"

"Okay...if you need anything, please call me. I'll stay close."

"Gawr!"

Charlotte walked toward the flower meadow with Roo. She looked sick with worry, but she probably wanted to give him space so he could sleep in peace. Her kindness squeezed his heart. When there was enough distance between them, he heaved a tremendous sigh and slumped down on the spot.

"Wait, I can't do this... This is impossible..."

Who knew what happened to his resolve from the day before. Allen was thoroughly, utterly overwhelmed. Things had gone well last night when he'd invited Charlotte to a picnic. But when he'd retired to his room and started thinking about what he would say or what would be the perfect present for her, he had been assailed by unbearable anxiety.

There was no lie in the sentiment he had shared with Magus and the others. Even if she didn't accept him, he would be content as long as Charlotte was happy. But if she rejected him, he would no doubt be devastated. In the worst case, he might never recover. The moment he had been struck by such a possibility, he was absolutely convinced it would happen, and became a total wreck. In the end, he didn't get a wink of sleep, and he couldn't bring himself to eat or drink anything in the morning. In all his twenty-one years, it was the first time he felt like throwing up from nerves.

"D-Don't be such a coward... Where's your usual bravado?" Allen moaned with his head in his hands. At this rate, his dream of a perfect confession of love would end as just that—an impossible dream.

"Should I postpone it until I'm—hm?"

Just as he was about to give up, he heard a light, chiming laughter in the air. He looked up to see Roo hopping up and down a ways down the hill. She had the guild's scarf around her neck, as well as a garland of flowers. Apparently, Charlotte had woven one for her.

"Hee hee. How do you like it, Roo?"

“Gawr gawr!”

“You’re a cute little girl, Roo. You like to dress up, don’t you?”

“Woof!”

Charlotte giggled as Roo licked her cheek. “Oh, that tickles.”

Charlotte’s smile seared Allen’s eyes, even more blinding than the dazzling sun. He gazed at the scene absentmindedly and murmured, “I...really do love her.” There was no shyness or embarrassment inside him. He accepted that fact as the simple truth. He scratched his head with a sigh. “I better come out with it as soon as possible... If I don’t, I might just let it slip at a weird moment.”

Whenever she drew closer to him, he was overwhelmed by emotions. It was entirely possible that he would accidentally say it out loud when he didn’t mean to. For example, it could happen in the morning like this:

“Good morning, Allen.”

“Morning. I love you.”

“What...?”

Or while shopping in town:

“Hmm, what to do? Which one do you like more, Allen, apple or orange?”

“If I had to choose, I like you the best...”

“Um...?”

Or at night:

“So, good nigh—”

“I love you!”

“Excuse me?! ”

Whatever situation it was, Allen could only picture some kind of disaster. He certainly didn’t want such an accidental confession, and he also didn’t want to perplex her. Which meant...he had to tell her right here, today. Allen balled his hands into fists and steeled himself.

“Wait, but what should I say? I can’t just come up with some smooth line... This is impossible...” He hung his head again in agony. It would be too straightforward to say he liked her. But what phrases did he know for this kind of situation? Nothing. He racked his brain for something, anything he could say.

I promise I’ll make you happy.

He’d already told her that the day they met.

I want you to be with me till death do us part.

Wasn’t that a tad too heavy for the first time?

I’ll give you the whole world!

That sounded villainous, and again, too heavy.

He was mulling over different lines when Charlotte called to him.

“Allen!”

“Whoa!” He looked up to find her rushing toward him. Roo wasn’t

with her, and he could see something was wrong. His frivolous thoughts vanished in an instant.

“I-I’m sorry to disturb your rest...but it’s an emergency!”

“What happened? Is Roo okay?”

Out of breath, Charlotte spoke between gasps. “Roo is fine... But...um...I don’t know what to do...” At this point, her face was even paler than Allen’s had been. She pointed beyond the flower meadow and cried out desperately, “There’s a dragon over there, and it’s hurt!”

Charlotte led Allen through the field of flowers to the middle of the knoll. In a slight hollow, Roo was watching over a small dragon, which was huddled up on the ground. It was small compared to the average dragon, but it was still about three meters in length. Its curled body was covered in light green scales, and it was emitting feeble cries.

“Oh...it’s a young Noble Dragon,” Allen murmured in wonder. “It’s a really rare breed.”

“It is?”

“Uh-huh. Basically, they’re a species that repels magic.” For wizards like Allen, Noble Dragons were a natural enemy. They normally lived quietly in caves or burrows, so it was extremely rare to see them outside. Perhaps it had wandered out of the dungeon nearby and gotten too wounded to return.

I don’t see any visible injuries, though... To Allen, the dragon seemed perfectly fine. But seeing how it didn’t budge even when they were a few meters away, he knew it must be sick somehow. “Let’s try this for now... *Heal*.” He tried casting a simple healing spell on the dragon. A pale light enwreathed its body, but—

“Grrrr...!” The dragon growled in a low voice, and the light dispersed.

Allen shrugged. “Half-baked spells like that won’t work on them. It’ll probably be quicker to bring back some potions from home.”

“Shall I try to talk to it?” Charlotte asked.

“Well, that might work...” Allen replied. If Charlotte could persuade the dragon like she had with Roo at the zoo, it might let them heal it without putting up a fight. “But it’s a magical beast in the wild, so—whoa!”

“Allen?!”

Allen felt a strong impact from behind and stumbled forward a few steps. He thought it was the dragon’s attack, but it was only Roo behind him. She seemed to have tackled him. “Ow... What’s up, Roo?”

“Gawr!” Roo looked at Allen sharply and pointed to the Noble Dragon with her muzzle, as if to say, “Be careful.”

Charlotte looked puzzled. “Roo’s been acting strange. She was

growling at the dragon too... Do Fenrirs dislike dragons?"

"Well, they're certainly not mortal enemies..." Allen stroked his chin thoughtfully and stared at the Noble Dragon. He didn't know why, but he had a bad feeling about this. The dragon kept up its melancholy cry. But its monotonous wail seemed to Allen a bit like bait to lure in prey.

We better keep our distance, he decided, and glanced at Roo. Roo gave a slight nod too, and he knew they had an understanding. They quickly shifted so that they were standing on both sides of Charlotte and prepared to retreat. "Right. We should—"

"Ah!"

The ground underneath them shook violently with a thundering rumble, and they could barely keep upright. A crack ran through the ground by their feet.

"Charlotte!" Allen shot out a hand to her, but—

"Capy!" A black shadow appeared out of nowhere and pulled her away.

"Wha—?!"

The next moment, the ground collapsed underneath him, and Allen was thrown into a deep abyss.



"Ugh... Charlotte!" Allen sprang up and glanced around him.

He was surrounded by heaps of rubble. He could see the blue sky far above him, framed by a steep precipice. There had apparently been a tunnel under the flower meadow. He could tell it hadn't been that long since he'd fallen through the crack, but he couldn't see Charlotte anywhere.

"Crap... *Fly*—?!" He tried to use flight magic, but he only managed to hover a few centimeters aboveground. He was stupefied. He couldn't activate his magic.

Then he remembered that he had tried to cast a spell as he fell, but from the looks of it, that hadn't worked either. He was suddenly frantic with worry. He nearly blacked out, but he held out on the verge of it and shouted, "Damn! What the hell's happening?! Charlotte! Where are you! Charlotte! Can you hear me—"

"Shut up!"

Something knocked him over with tremendous force, and he went skidding on the ground. He looked up from where he lay on the ground and widened his eyes. "R-Roo...?"

"Calm down." She slapped his forehead with one mighty paw.

Allen gaped at the Fenrir. "You...can speak the standard language of magical beasts?"

"Of course I can. You got a problem with that?"

“Not at all... It’s just...you’ve never used it in front of us.” The only language of magical beasts that Allen could understand was the low-level standard language. Creatures like Dragons or Fenrirs often spoke the language of their individual species. These languages were difficult for humans to master, with the exception of skilled beast tamers. This was the first time Allen had actually exchanged words with Roo.

Roo tilted her head. *“Why should I stoop to your level? I can chat with Mommy just fine. I don’t have to talk to you.”*

“When you say ‘Mommy’...do you mean Charlotte?”

Roo scoffed. *“Duh. Mother is Mother, and Mommy is Mommy.”*

Allen assumed that “Mother” referred to Roo’s Fenrir mother. He knew Roo was attached to Charlotte, but he’d had no idea that Roo considered her a second mother. Some things made a bit more sense to Allen now. *No wonder Roo acts pretty cold with me...*

Thanks to Roo, Allen was able to regain his composure somewhat. He slowly got to his feet and glared at the gaping hole far above them. “What do you think, Roo? Is Charlotte there above us?”

“No...she’s not.” Roo shook her head powerlessly.

That was to be expected. Allen recalled the large shadow that he’d seen just before he fell underground. Allen pressed a hand to his forehead and groaned. “So...she was abducted, wasn’t she?”

“That’s right...” Roo replied bitterly.

A heavy silence fell over them. Allen clenched his fists so tightly that his hand hurt. He took a deep breath, then let his body go slack. He could do all the regretting later. Right now, he had to rescue Charlotte. He changed course and reflected on the situation.

“First, we should get out of here. You’ll help me, won’t you?”

“Of course. Anything for Mommy.”

“Good. But who could the culprit be? Pursuers from Neils Kingdom, or bounty hunters...?” Either way, Allen should’ve been able to sense their presence before they attacked. Whoever it was, it was clear that they were an enemy to be reckoned with.

On top of that, he couldn’t use his magic. There were plenty of spells that limited one’s use of magic within a certain area. But that required a thorough preparation. It was extremely rare for something like that to occur out of the blue. *Tch...looks like they had it all planned out.* It was likely that the enemy had been waiting for an opportunity for some time. That Noble Dragon was undoubtedly a decoy.

Allen was muttering to himself to analyze the situation when Roo commented, *“You’re calmer than I expected. Thought you’d be panicking by now.”*

“Well, at least I can tell Charlotte’s safe.”

“Huh?”

“Oh, it’s nothing.” Allen waved her off. “She’s been going out by herself more often these days, so I put a special spell on her as a security measure.” The spell was like a beacon that allowed him to gauge roughly how far away she was and whether she was in any critical danger. According to this spell, Charlotte wasn’t so far away, and she wasn’t wounded either. For now, she was safe.

When Allen explained all this, he thought Roo might be impressed, but she threw a look at him like he was some kind of dirty sewer rat. *“You better stay away from Mommy for a while.”*

“Why?!”

“Shut it, you creep.” Roo kicked some dirt at him with her hind legs.

Even though he hadn’t even confessed his love to her mother yet, he felt like he’d suddenly gained a rebellious teenage daughter.

“At least we know she’s safe, though.” Roo shook her head wearily and sighed. *“I think I know what the enemy’s after.”*

“What do you mean?”

“I know the culprit.”

“What?!” Allen’s shout echoed in the dark.

“You know the zoo that saved me?” Roo went on gravely.

“Huh? Uh, yeah. What about it?”

“The one who kidnapped Mommy is the zoo’s—”

“Wait,” Allen interjected, pressing a finger to his lips, and Roo instantly went quiet. They strained their ears and heard countless thudding footsteps and the sound of something getting dragged over the ground reverberating through the cave. Some kind of swarm was approaching them from the depths of the darkness.

“Something’s...coming.”

“That smell...”

Soon, the horde emerged from the shadows with bloodcurdling growls. It was a pack of full-grown, dark green Noble Dragons, each at least ten meters in length. Dozens of them surrounded Allen and Roo.

“I get it now. No wonder simple spells don’t work here.”

“It’s no time to be impressed, is it?” Roo cast him a chilly glance.

Just as Allen and Roo were facing a deadly crisis, Charlotte was receiving an extraordinarily lavish welcome.

“Peeeeep!”

“Oh, umm...thank you very much?” Charlotte bowed at the fruits presented to her.

“Pip pip peeep! ♡” The slimes which had carried the offerings to her steamed happily, and bobbled away again.

She watched them go, then looked around. “Where am I...?”

The vast space was shaped like a cylinder. The wall all around her

was bare rock, and it was almost completely covered by lush vines. When she looked up, she could see the clear blue sky high above her, and the sun shone bright over where she sat.

Innumerable magical beasts were nesting in the hollows of the green wall, and Charlotte was in the lowest layer of them all. She had been sleeping on a green carpet that covered the ground when she awoke. At first, she was afraid the beasts might devour her, but none of them showed any signs of aggression. In fact, they each approached her in turn bringing offerings of fruits and flowers.

Thanks to them, Charlotte was slightly comforted. It seemed safe here for the moment. But she was much more worried about Allen and Roo. "I hope they're safe..."

"Certainly."

Charlotte gasped and whirled around. A beast had crept up on her. It was covered in brown fur: a large, squat, bulky creature resembling a rat. It had four short legs, and its forehead was marked with a scar in the shape of an X. Charlotte had seen that deadpan face somewhere before.

"Y-You're...the Infernal Capybara from the petting zoo?"

"So I am. It's a pleasure to be in your company again, Lady Charlotte." The Infernal Capybara bowed to her. It was, in fact, one of the magical beasts that she had encountered on her trip with Allen just about a month ago.

B-But...why would it come all the way here? Charlotte stared at the creature, stunned.

The beast narrowed its already thin eyes and continued, *"The Infernal Capybara is simply the name of my species. My true name is Gosetsu. I am delighted to make your acquaintance in full."*

"Gosetsu... Was it you who brought me here? Is it true that Allen and Roo are safe?!"

"There's no need for you to be concerned. Please, allow me to explain." Gosetsu's tone was calm. Since the creature had a ponderous look to begin with, it exuded the air of an aged elder. But something about it made Charlotte nervous. Gosetsu slowly walked toward her, then bowed its round head low before her. It spoke solemnly like a faithful knight swearing their loyalty to their master. *"My poor Lady Charlotte. You have suffered, but from now on, you shall have nothing to fear. I, Gosetsu, shall rescue you and ensure your contentment."*

"What...?" Charlotte could only stare at Gosetsu, speechless. Gosetsu's voice sounded too serious, too foreboding, to be some kind of joke.

"My intention had been to spend the rest of my days in peace and quiet at that Zoo," Gosetsu pressed on, narrating the story of its life to her. It had fought countless fierce battles against formidable enemies

and was journeying for the sole purpose of honing its skills in martial arts. As it grew older, however, it chose to pass many of its territories on to its disciples and go into retirement. Upon negotiating with the Yunoha Zoo of Magical Beasts, Gosetsu became the ringleader of the petting zoo and had spent more than fifty years' worth of tranquil days there while keeping an eye on the other creatures. *"After I met you, my Lady, I happened to see a newspaper that someone had brought into the Zoo."*

"N-Newspaper...you don't mean—"

"Yes. I saw the articles painting you as a threat to your native country. It was full of baseless rumors," Gosetsu spoke calmly, then slowly looked up. *"You're certainly not a bad woman, my dear Lady. I understood immediately that you were framed."*

"Yes..." Charlotte pressed her hands to her chest. Gosetsu's words reminded her of the day she had met Allen, when he had told her something similar. She had been accused of crimes she had never committed and lost everything in her life. She had fled all by herself. And when she eventually reached him, how happy his words had made her when he'd said he believed in her. But her fond recollection was wiped away by what Gosetsu said next.

"Therefore, I have thrown away my days of quiet retirement and have resolved to wield my powers once again."

"What do you mean by powers—?" Just as Charlotte looked up at Gosetsu, a flash of light shot across her vision and there was an explosion behind her. "Oh! Wh-What was that?!" She whipped around. The rock wall behind her, which had been covered by ivy just moments ago, now bore a giant, imprinted X. Charlotte stared in astonishment as a cloud of dust whirled in the air.

Gosetsu continued calmly, *"My secret sword, Pruning... It's one of the secret techniques that I conceived in my idle moments."* What Gosetsu held in its mouth was a mere branch. The branch glowed faintly, and it seemed to be charged with something like electricity.

Charlotte gulped. She thought of the lessons on magic that Allen had given her. He'd taught her that there were two basic categories of magic: One used the power of magic to generate miracles. The other imbued the power of magic into physical bodies or objects. It was difficult to control the strength of the latter, and if an average sorcerer attempted it, they might lose control. But on the flip side, with these objects, it was possible to produce an enormous amount of power with very little magic.

"An expert could fell a dragon with a single knife," Allen had said.

Charlotte was convinced that Gosetsu must be such an expert. She realized a hush had fallen over the whole space, and the other beasts were staring in their direction.

Gosetsu's eyes were clear and unwavering. That was precisely why Charlotte felt beads of cold sweat trickle down her spine. Gosetsu looked around, still holding the branch in its mouth.

"This is a dungeon called Cave Toor—A territory that I passed down to my own disciple, long ago." Gosetsu spoke neither in pride nor in modesty. It merely gave her the truth. *"Such old nests of mine are scattered all over the world. One word from me...and hordes of magical beasts—hundreds of times more than the creatures gathered here—would flock in an instant to await my command."*

"Wh-What do you plan to do...with all those creatures?!"

"Naturally, I have only one purpose," Gosetsu said simply. *"We shall surge into your native land, the Kingdom of Neils, and in your name, we will raze it to the ground."*

"What?!"

"My Lady, we shall bring death upon those who made you suffer, despair upon those who betrayed you, and shame upon those who looked on without extending a hand to you. They shall be disgraced far more than what they made you endure. All will turn to ashes, and when the carnage is done, we will proudly rise above mountains of corpses and streams of blood."

Gosetsu's spine-chilling words seeped into the silence and froze the air around them. Charlotte couldn't speak; her mouth felt almost numb. She forced herself to move her lips, and spoke in a quivering voice. "Wh-Why...would you do...such a dreadful thing...?!"

"Why, it's merely a case of righteous indignation, of course." Gosetsu slowly shook its head. *"I simply could not bear it any longer. A world in which someone like you, my Lady, should be exploited and made to suffer! It must be righted by force."*

"But...but that's not right!" Charlotte shouted with all her might. She did have thoughts about the people who had treated her cruelly, who had taken everything from her. She couldn't put a clear name to it, like resentment or anger, but it was true that she felt something nebulous that shadowed her heart. But still, she couldn't stand by and watch Gosetsu destroy the Kingdom and commit those horrifying acts. "That's not what I wish for at all! Please stop!"

"You speak in riddles, my Lady. You are the victim, beyond a doubt. Revenge must be taken."

"But it's wrong! And you definitely shouldn't involve other people who had nothing to do with it!"

"You truly are a kind soul, my Lady... I grieve for you." Gosetsu sighed and looked up at the sky. *"As I thought, perhaps that wizard boy is to blame."*

"Do you mean...Allen?"

"Indeed. That sniveling youngster is too soft, if you ask me." Gosetsu

shrugged wearily. A tinge of vexation came into its calm voice for the first time. *"I have taken the liberty of observing the two of you for a while now. That boy brags about making you happy, but he hasn't moved a finger to punish that Kingdom. He is merely idling away the time. He is nothing but lazy."*

"Lazy? But—"

"Is there any other word fit to describe him? He isn't rescuing you. He's merely corrupting you. Isn't that correct?"

Charlotte widened her eyes at Gosetsu's harsh words. Her fingertips felt cold as ice, and pain shot through the back of her head. In the past, when someone spoke to her like this, she couldn't say anything back. But she was different now. She stared angrily at Gosetsu and asserted, *"That's not true."*

"Come again?"

"With Allen, I was finally able to live, really live, for the first time." Those quiet, peaceful days with Allen, in which she had nothing to fear. There were slight changes even between those tranquil days, and every moment was precious to her. Whether it was laughing, crying, or getting angry, she had never imagined there would come a day when she could express her true feelings. And it was all thanks to Allen that she was able to change like that. *"I won't let anyone deny that—not even you, Gosetsu!"*

"You only speak that way because that youngster has tricked you with his charms. Only I can save you, my dear Lady." Gosetsu's eyes were resolute. A thin smile played on its lips. *"You shall come to understand it soon enough, whether you like it or not—once that boy is shut off from you."*

"What...what did you do to Allen?!"

"There is nothing to fear. He hasn't lost any limbs. However, as he gets in the way of our scheme...we have captured him along with the Fenrir. The Noble Dragons are guarding them."

"Oh no...!" Those dragons that repel magic. They must be the worst kind of enemy for Allen. It's all my fault. They're in danger because of me... Charlotte almost fainted in despair, but Gosetsu was in high spirits.

"I was looking for a way to tear you away from that man...so it was a stroke of good luck that you came to me yourself. Now, I will be able to advance my scheme in one fell swoop." Gosetsu reverently stretched its forepaws before Charlotte. *"Let us proceed as one, my Lady. Please rejoice in the infernal calamity that I shall bring forth for your sake alone."*

"Oh! No, please, stay away...!" Charlotte recoiled, shaking her head. But she soon reached the edge of an abyss and had nowhere to escape. The other creatures also crept closer to her, and the circle around her grew smaller and smaller. Her knees trembled, and her

eyes were almost brimming with tears. At that moment, however, she remembered Allen's words:

Even when you're trapped in a nightmare, I'll always come to rescue you. So don't worry about a thing.

Allen had reassured her on that night when she'd had a nightmare. His words gave her courage now. She mustered all her strength and shouted, "Help! Allen!"

Her voice echoed against the cylindrical wall and shook the blue sky. In the next moment—

"Of course I will!"

The familiar voice came from above. She looked up to find Allen standing on the rim of the pit with a fearless grin on his face.

"Allen!" Charlotte cried out, stunned.

"Sorry to make you wait," he said, casually raising a hand. As far as he could see, she was unhurt. He breathed a sigh of relief, but when he noticed tears welling up in the corner of her eyes, the fire blazed in the pit of his stomach. As he tried to suppress his rage, Gosetsu barked, more wide-eyed than Charlotte.

"Impossible! How did you get away from the pack of Noble Dragons?!"

"How? Well, there's only one way, isn't there?" Allen shrugged and snapped his fingers. The next moment, huge masses rained from the sky along with the howling of a wolf. The Noble Dragons fell to the bottom of the pit with a deafening roar. All of them were bleary-eyed and nearly unconscious. Faint whimpers escaped them, but they didn't stir at all. Roo now stood next to Allen and glowered into the pit. "As you can see, I defeated them. Simple."

Allen sneered at the stunned beasts. He murmured an incantation and produced a giant ball of light. There were still a number of Noble Dragons in the pit, so the magic light flickered faintly, but it was still solid enough as a source of light. "It's true that Noble Dragons make lesser magic ineffective. In that case...all I needed to do was rev up my magic power and use sheer brute force."

"*Hah... Amusing.*" Gosetsu clamped the branch in its mouth and slowly glared up at Allen. Nothing but pure malice emanated from its body. Its murderous enmity ruffled the other beasts. The air felt explosive.

"Allen!" Charlotte hastily cried out. "Gosetsu is planning to attack the Neils Kingdom!"

"Hm, I'm not surprised."

"What?" Charlotte stared in surprise.

Roo had already told him that Charlotte's abductor was the Infernal Capybara from the zoo. Knowing the culprit, it wasn't difficult to surmise its motive. "There are two things that Infernal Capybaras cling to: food and chivalry. Once they take a liking to a

creature, they're forever faithful and stop at nothing to advocate for them." But if that was all, they would merely be dutiful creatures with a strong sense of morality. However, they often went overboard. They were disruptive troublemakers that went above and beyond their masters' wishes.

"I already knew they'd taken a liking to you after our day at the Zoo. But it's very rare for them to take humans as their master, so...I didn't try to come up with countermeasures. This is my fault. I'm sorry."

"Oh..." Charlotte muttered. "It's nothing you have to apologize for!"

"*Precisely,*" Gosetsu murmured threateningly, glared at Allen. "*You have no right to utter a word to Lady Charlotte.*"

"Hmph, you talk big, for a rodent," Allen scoffed. "Do you really think...that if you destroy everyone that made Charlotte suffer, she'll be saved?"

"*Of course!*" Gosetsu barked. The other beasts stirred into motion all at once. Those that could fly leaped into the air, and the rest scrambled up the wall straight at Allen.

"I'm counting on you, Roo!" Allen shouted.

"*Tch... Guess I have to.*" Roo let him climb onto her back, then dove into the pit.

Noble Dragons lunged at them, but Allen cast a spell at them. "*Frozen Lance!*" A beam of vivid, indigo light shot from his hand and pierced the dragons' wings. Their magnificent wings froze in an instant, and they fell back into the pit. But before Allen and Roo could catch their breath, the next in the horde of beasts assaulted them one after another.

"Hah! It's endless...!" Allen muttered.

"*Tired already?!*" Gosetsu jibed.

"By no means! This is perfect for blowing off steam!" He cast a continuous stream of spells and made his way through the beasts' attacks. Thundering roars and flying sparks shook the pit, and thick smoke filled the air.

"Allen!"

A fierce blaze sliced through the air the split second after Roo twisted her body to dodge. As she landed on a nest nearby, a shadow charged at them in a blur. It was Gosetsu. It swung the branch in its mouth ferociously and sprang up above their heads.

"*Your ways are far too soft! You'll never save her like that!*"

"Shut up! What's wrong with being soft!" Allen managed to parry the relentless blows by a hair's breadth. Gosetsu's weapon was a blade of light forged out of magic power. It was ideal for conquering monsters. Deflecting the vicious attacks, Allen shouted, "That

‘revenge’ you talk of—I’ve considered the same thing! I’ve thought about launching an attack on that Kingdom countless times!”

Every time the thought crossed his mind—that the people who inflicted pain on Charlotte were still going about their lives without any repercussions—it made something dark well up in him. That fury and enmity had only grown more intense since he had admitted to himself that he loved Charlotte. And yet he still tried hard to suppress it.

“I swore to teach her all the pleasures of this world! That includes the sweet opportunity for revenge!” he shouted. Too many things had been taken away from Charlotte in her life, so Allen was determined not to deprive her of anything else. He would give her everything and keep on protecting her. That was his firm oath. “That’s why I’ll wait until she makes her own decision! If I take revenge without listening to her, like you’re trying to do now, that’s only going to hurt her even more!”

“What’s wrong with bringing villains to justice?! Lady Charlotte must desire it deep down! That must be her path to happiness!”

“All the more reason for me to stop you!” Allen roared.

“What?!”

Allen had been prepared to back down if Charlotte could find happiness with someone else. But now that another talked of giving her happiness, he found that it made his blood boil just to hear it. He stepped on Roo’s back and leaped, brandishing a sword of light with all his strength.

“Making the girl I love happy should be my privilege alone!!!”

The two clashed in the air. Allen’s flash of light disarmed Gosetsu and sent the creature flying back. Gosetsu slammed into the wall, making a giant crater. It slid down limply, but it wasn’t dead. Allen had held back just enough to incapacitate it. The other beasts were unsettled to see their boss get defeated, and shrank back from Allen.

“Phew. Punishment accomplished.” Allen extinguished the sword of light and wiped the sweat from his forehead. He was feeling rather radiant after venting his anger and completed that moderate workout.

Roo approached him hesitantly. She looked up at Allen anxiously and cooed. *“Uh, hey, was that...really a good choice?”*

“What? You think I went too far?”

“That’s not it... That’s not what I’m talking about at all,” Roo mumbled evasively.

Allen was puzzled by her odd response, but he put that aside and rushed to Charlotte. “Charlotte! Are you okay?”

“Ah...” Charlotte muttered, stunned.

“I’m so sorry. I can’t believe I let that happen... I’ll be much more careful from now on—hm?”

Charlotte had turned scarlet and was frozen in place. She was in a trance, with her eyes open wide, and apparently forgetting to breathe. Allen was alarmed to see her in such a peculiar state and peered at her face.

“What’s wrong, Charlotte? Are you hurt?!”

“Ah, um, no...I’m...fine...” Charlotte looked down.

She didn’t seem to be injured, but she was acting strange. Allen couldn’t fathom the reason. A lukewarm atmosphere hung in the air around them. The beasts that he had been battling against only a few moments before were now turned to them as if they were watching over their interaction.

Gosetsu slowly rose and muttered, “*Hmph... You got me, young man.*”

“You—” Allen stepped forward to protect Charlotte and confronted the creature head-on. “You’re still getting up for more? It’s no use resisting, you know. You’d be better off if you gave up now.”

“I wouldn’t dream of resisting any further. I may be going senile...but one duel is enough for me to gauge the gap in our strengths.” Gosetsu slowly shook its head, then bowed at Allen. *“I admit my utter defeat. Now I realize the full extent of your powers.”*

“Uh, really?” Allen stared, round-eyed. Infernal Capybaras were extremely persistent. Once they set their minds on something, they hardly ever veered off course. But he couldn’t detect any lies in Gosetsu’s words. “Hm... You’re rather understanding, for an Infernal Capybara.”

“Why, it’s hardly surprising,” Gosetsu said nonchalantly, letting out a chuckle like a good-natured grandfather. *“Even I can see that getting in the way of young people in love is in rather bad taste.”*

“Hm...what?”

“Those words you spoke just now—it moved even my old withered heart. I had assumed you would never admit those feelings of devotion...but I see you have already confided in her.”

“What in the world are you...ahh!!!” It finally struck him. He remembered what he had just said. *The girl...I love...it slipped out, didn’t it?!* His whole body felt feverish now.

Roo looked at Allen and sighed in disbelief. *“I knew you liked her, but...didn’t think you’d pick a moment like that to admit it.”*

“Don’t tell me,” Gosetsu added, *“was that, in fact, your very first confession? Truly?”*

The other beasts around them flung whatever comments that popped into their heads: “You’ve got to be kidding...” and “That’s not a good look,” and “But wait, isn’t it so dorky it’s kinda cute?” and so on.

“Stop it! Don’t gang up on me!” Allen barked. He buried his head in his hands. Now that he had said it, he couldn’t take it back. He had

dreamed of saying something suave, accompanied by a charming gift, with the backdrop of some breathtaking scenery. *But...oh well, maybe this is more like me anyway.*

He'd come this far, and he simply had to embrace it. He spun around to face Charlotte again. She was still rooted to the spot, blushing bright red. It was obvious that the full meaning of Allen's words had sunk in. But if Allen took a step back and tried to laugh it off, she would probably go along with it, for his sake. That was why Allen swore to himself not to run away.

"Uh, Charlotte...so, that's how it is." He looked straight at Charlotte and told her how he really felt. "I like you. I'm in love with you. I...want you to go out with me."

What came out were simple, unadorned words, but they expressed all his feelings. Charlotte stood still, listening closely, blushing deeply. Allen waited for her answer. Five seconds. Ten seconds. One minute. Finally, when nearly five minutes had passed, Charlotte slowly opened her mouth.

"I..." A frail murmur escaped her soft lips.

"I?"

"I'm sorry...!" Charlotte slipped past Allen and leaped onto Roo's back. "Please! Roo!"

"Huh? Uh, okay. Got it."

Roo clambered up the wall, carrying Charlotte on her back, and they vanished from the pit in the blink of an eye. Allen could only watch them go, helpless and transfixed.

After a long silence, he emitted a sound. "Uh?"

"Ah, well. Take heart, Sir Allen." With its short foreleg, Gosetsu patted the freshly rejected Allen on his back.

The sun was setting over the field of flowers.

Charlotte sat motionless in the middle of the meadow, hugging her knees to her chest, her face downcast. Roo was sitting quietly by her side. She cooed softly from time to time, as if to ask, "Are you really okay?" But Charlotte didn't look up. She was as still as a stone.

Allen walked up to her from behind and said lightly, "Hey, can I come over now?"

Charlotte's shoulders tensed. Even when he drew closer, she seemed determined not to lift her face. Roo glanced anxiously from one to the other, then moved away to give them some space. She threw a look at Allen as she passed by and growled, *"If you make Mommy cry, I'll bite you."*

"I'm well aware of that." Allen nodded calmly at her threat. He crouched in front of Charlotte, who still kept her face down. He shrugged in resignation. "You know, it's pretty tough even for me to

show up in front of someone who just rejected me. But I had something I had to say, so I came.”

Charlotte was silent.

“Remember I told you before...that I can tell when someone’s lying?” It was a coping mechanism that he had acquired after he had been thoroughly betrayed by people he had trusted. He had never imagined it would come in handy at a time like this. “So I can tell. I could see you were lying when you said, ‘I’m sorry.’ Am I wrong?”

Charlotte didn’t say anything. But he heard her gasp faintly, and he took it as confirmation. Allen sighed. “Why did you lie?”

Charlotte looked up as if someone had slapped her. “Because—because...!” Her face was smeared with tears, and heartrendingly twisted. “I’m an exile...so I always told myself...that I have to...leave you...someday, Allen...!” The words flooded out of her, as unstoppable as her tears. “But when I hear you say something like that, how can I ever go away...?! Even though I promised myself not to say...anything... I just don’t want to be...any more of a burden on you...than I already am! So why...!” She buried her face in her hands and broke down into sobs. “I knew... I knew that how I felt about you...was not just naughty... It was something truly *bad*!”

Allen stood still, listening closely to the words that came gushing out from her soul. Eventually, he sighed. “I knew it... I thought it might be something like that.”

He had imagined this kind of scenario as a possibility. Charlotte didn’t value herself enough, and too often she put others first. It was entirely plausible that she would suppress her own feelings for Allen’s sake, just as Allen had tried to do for her.

He knelt in front of her, looked into her eyes, and told her, “Listen. You might say you’re a burden...but that’s just not true.”

“Oh...”

“For me, you’re light itself. You changed my life.” His had been a dull life, in which days slipped idly by in monotonous succession. But that all changed drastically after he had met Charlotte. Since then, he’d met so many people, had all kinds of new experiences, and each day took on fresh colors that had never been there before. Even if he had continued to teach at the School of Magic, he was certain his life wouldn’t have felt as fruitful as it did now. And that was all because Charlotte was with him.

“I just want you to be happy, wherever you are. But...if I can be selfish,” he paused, and gently took her trembling hands in his. He felt a lump in his throat from a mix of embarrassment and tender love, but he carefully articulated how he felt, putting his heart into every word. “If you’d allow it, I want you to be happy with me. Will you stay with me and light my life, always?”

“Do you really...want someone like me?” Charlotte asked in a quivering voice.

“Of course. You’re all I ever wanted.” Allen smiled shyly. What he said was the whole truth. He didn’t wish for anything else in this world—only her. So he decided to tell her once again, looking straight into her eyes. “Let me ask you one more time. I love you. Will you go out with me?”

“I...” This time, she hesitated only for a moment. Her face creased into a bright smile, and she said in a slightly hoarse voice, “I...I love you too...Allen.”

Allen pulled her into a soft embrace. “Thank you,” he murmured. Charlotte buried her face against his shoulder, crying quietly. He took in her warmth, and her tears, for a long time—and he promised himself that he would always be there to let her cry on his shoulder.

“Ah, this sure does take me back to the good old days,” Gosetsu chuckled softly, appearing next to Roo and watching the couple from a distance. *“I remember the days when I used to have an army of males waiting on me, and I was basking in a reverse harem.”*

“You should be sorry for making a mess, grandpa—” Roo turned to Gosetsu in shock. *“Wait, you’re a grandma?!”*

Chapter 3: Naughty First Date

One day, Magus and Groh stepped through the door to the adventurers' guild and opened their eyes wide at what they saw, their laughter dying down midsentence.

"What's wrong, boss?" Their henchmen walked in behind them and also went quiet. The entire gang's eyes were fixed on one corner of the bar.

Alone at a small table sat Allen, drinking spirits all by himself. This in itself wouldn't have been alarming, but the problem was his gloomy expression. Utterly, hopelessly gloomy. He seemed to be looking at nothing, with dark shadows falling over his eyes. Like a windup toy, he carried the glass of hard liquor to his lips over and over again, yet he looked completely sober. It was as if he was drinking in honor of the dead. The tense air around him made the other patrons give him a wide berth, so all the nearby seats were empty.

Magus and the others formed a huddle and exchanged whispers.

"H-Hey, what's up with him? Didn't he confess his love to the young lady?! Why does he look like a corpse?!"

"Don't ask me! I haven't seen him since the last time he was here!"

They had all helped Allen plan his confession to Charlotte about a week ago. They hadn't run into the pair since then. None of the adventurers had followed up on it, but they had all assumed that the pair must have started going out, and Allen would be on cloud nine.

The reality, however, was right in front of them. The shadow of death was clear on Allen's face.

"So...does that mean...?" Magus murmured.

"Yeah...could be it." Groh gave Magus a grim nod.

The two of them braced themselves and approached Allen. Their henchmen followed suit without protest, all bound by the same troubling thought.

"Hey there, Dark Overlord," Magus gently called.

"If you're having drinks, let us keep you company, huh?" Groh chimed in.

Allen merely threw them a glance. "Oh. It's you lot."

The group went ahead and moved over some chairs and tables to sit around Allen. They started drinking and chatting, but there was a

forced vibe about the party.

When he saw that everyone had a drink in their hands, Magus patted Allen's shoulder and said, "Well, uh, what can I say? Cheer up, Dark Overlord."

"Yeah, there's plenty of fish in the sea, you know," Groh added. The henchmen looked on solemnly.

But Allen scowled back at them. "What in the world are you on about?"

"Huh? Uh, weren't you turned down by the young lady?" Magus asked.

"We're trying to cheer you up here," said Groh.

"Hmph... I don't know where you got that idea," Allen grumbled, pouring himself another glass. "The confession was a success. Charlotte and I are officially an item."

"Huh?"

"Wha?"

Everyone froze in place. Oblivious to their reaction, Allen took another swig of his drink as the realization set in and the whole group erupted at once.

"Whaaaaaat?!"

Their shout jolted Allen, and he splashed his drink a little. "Whoa!" He glared at the men around him as he wiped up the table. "What's wrong with you lot? Can't you drink without making a racket?"

"Now wait a minute! What's wrong with *you*?! Whatcha doing over here looking like you're drinking away your pain?!"

"Exactly! If it all went well, shouldn't you be the happiest man alive right now?!"

"Well...that's what I'd thought in the beginning," Allen sighed, a self-deprecating grin playing on his lips. It was just as they said. He'd been convinced that if he got together with Charlotte, a rosy future would be awaiting him. "But a serious problem has come up. And I'm racking my brains for a way to deal with it."

The men remained confused. "A p-problem...?"

"Uh-huh...one that's troublesome even for me."

Everyone sensed the gravity of the issue from Allen's tone, and they swallowed hard, waiting for him to explain.

Allen covered his face with trembling hands and exclaimed, "When you're going out with someone...what in the world are you supposed to do?!"

BANG CRASH BOOM!!!

Tables broke, bottles flew in the air, Magus fell over and made a giant hole in the floor.

The people around them turned around, startled by the

commotion, but when they saw who was causing it, they quickly lost interest. They all seemed to think, *Oh, it's them again.*

Magus and the others efficiently cleaned up their mess and turned back to Allen. Their wish to call it a day was written all over their faces, but none of them dared to say it out loud. They were too scared of Allen, who was still drinking one glass after another with a fierce expression.

"Umm, first off," they began hesitantly, "congratulations...?"

"Ah. It's thanks to your advice," Allen said bluntly. He then launched into a story of his confession a week ago. He told them he'd taken Charlotte to the flower meadow that day to confess his love to her, but the twists and turns of fate had brought them face-to-face with an Infernal Capybara, but in the end, he succeeded in his mission. He had officially become Charlotte's boyfriend. It should have been a happy story, but Allen told it as if he had witnessed the end of the world. "So...now Charlotte's getting official permission to have the Infernal Capybara accompany her in the city. The creature ended up coming to live with us too."

Magus and the others looked at each other, their faces blanched at the mention of the creature. "An Infernal Capybara on top of a Fenrir..."

"It's getting more and more unreal, the Dark Overlord's army..."

Infernal Capybaras were infamous. All adventurers knew of their legends. While the beasts were incredibly reassuring to have on your side, they rarely obeyed anyone. Even the most skilled beast tamers found it nearly impossible to befriend them.

After the incident in Cave Toor, Gosetsu the Infernal Capybara had bowed to Allen respectfully and put forth a request. *"I owe you an apology for stirring up all this trouble. To make up for it, I would be honored to guard Lady Charlotte. Please, will you consider letting me stay by her side?"*

Allen's reply was flat and stone-faced. "Uh, no. Go back to your zoo." However, nothing could move Gosetsu once she set her mind to something. Though he hemmed and hawed over it, he decided that it would be safer if Gosetsu stayed somewhere Allen could keep an eye on her. Begrudgingly, he allowed her to live with them.

Now Gosetsu slept in Charlotte's room as attendant number two. Allen tentatively allowed this because Gosetsu was a female; he would have thrown her out otherwise. For now, he'd asked Roo to keep an eye on Gosetsu, but so far there was no sign of anything suspicious.

Allen had, of course, gotten in touch with the Yunoha Zoo of Magical Beasts, where the Infernal Capybara used to live, but all they said was this: "Take back Gosetsu by force? That's simply impossible. Please take care of her."

“Anyhow,” Allen went on, “back to the subject at hand... What in the world am I supposed to do now that we’re going out?”

“Uh, just flirt and make out with her...what else?” Magus muttered.

Allen slammed his fist on the table. “If I knew the etiquette for that, I wouldn’t be in trouble right now!”

A whole week had passed since the day at the meadow. Their first week as lovers should have been a time of honey-sweet bliss.

However, there had been nothing like that.

For example, when they greeted each other in the morning:

“Oh, uh, morning,” Allen would mumble.

“G-Good, morning...” Charlotte would stutter.

“Let’s...eat?”

“O-Okay.”

Or when their hands touched by accident in the course of the day:

“Ah!” Charlotte would gasp.

“S-Sorry...! It wasn’t on purpose!”

“N-No, um...it’s fine.”

Or just before they went to sleep:

“Uhh...’night,” Allen would say.

“Y-Yes. Good night...”

Every interaction between them went like that. They could barely talk or look at each other properly, let alone do something as salacious as make out. The root of the problem was more than obvious. They were simply too self-conscious. It all boiled down to that.

Still, these sweet-yet-frustrating moments weren’t all bad. Even when they were sitting in silence, he was filled with warmth just from being in the room with her. He really did feel like he was happier than before.

But...now that they were lovers, he wanted to flirt with her. Of course, he wanted to make out with her, to kiss her so much that people would feel compelled to look away. Even though Allen was rather slow on the uptake when it came to matters of romance, he still had such desires like most people. In fact, perhaps his desire was more urgent than the average person because he’d had such a long dry spell.

Unfortunately, he had zero experience in love. He had no idea when or how to make the first move.

“I’ll swallow my pride and ask you...” Allen said earnestly, looking around at the men, “what do you guys usually do with your partners? It’d be good to gather that information.”

“Oh...” For some reason, this request made the group clam up. Allen was still puzzled by their reaction when Magus and Groh started mumbling, their eyes slightly averted.

“Uh...well of course, y’know. We go on dates and things. Stuff like

that,” Magus began.

“Yup. Dates for sure. I think. And give her flowers and nice stuff like necklaces...right?” Groh added.

“Would be nice to hold hands on a date...” one of the men joined in. “And lie down with my head in her lap...” said another.

They were all being quite vague and avoiding Allen’s eyes. Allen thought about this for a little while then looked up in realization. “I get it now. None of you actually have partners, do you?”

“Yeah yeah, so what! You got a problem with that?!” The men broke down weeping at the accusation. “If we had girlfriends, we wouldn’t be hanging out in a bar with a bunch of men in the middle of the day!”

“Right, apologies. That was my bad, I admit it,” Allen said honestly. “I see that question was a bit too difficult for you inexperienced men. I’ll be more careful next time. Well well, so I’m the only one in a relationship, huh. Hmph...I see.” He felt a little better now that he knew he was the only person present who had a girlfriend.

“Ugh...don’t gloat!”

“Deep down, you’re still the same as us! Definitely not smooth with the girls!”

The boos and hisses from the men were music to Allen’s ears. His complexion looked healthier than before, but the root of the problem was still there. He pondered it for a little while, stroking his chin, then muttered, “Still, what you said might not be such a bad idea.”

“You mean...?”

“Taking her out on a date, of course,” Allen said.

A date: a romantic escapade for lovers. Even Allen knew that much. He’d heard that some people also referred to time together at home as a “date,” but since they were already living under one roof, he didn’t count it.

Hm, a date, huh...definitely an option. It’s hard to be alone together at home, when we’ve got Roo and Gosetsu with us, but out on a date, it’ll be different.

The beasts did give them space to some extent, but even so, Allen and Charlotte didn’t often have privacy. If they went on an outing and called it a date, that issue would likely be resolved.

“Anyway, to sum up what you said before,” Allen said to the others, “we go out together just by ourselves, and I give her flowers and things like that. Is that the way it goes?”

“Well, sounds about right.” All the men joined in giving Allen advice. “Oh, there was a pancake place on the main street, I saw young women lining up in front of it. Maybe our dear goddess will like that too?”

“Hmm, good idea...” murmured Allen, jotting down notes on a memo pad.

Just like the week before, when they were brainstorming Allen’s confession scenario, the pack of grown men having a serious discussion about going on a date was a peculiar sight to behold. Even the waitresses stayed clear of them.

However, there was one figure who approached the group without a qualm. Just as the discussion was coming to a close, someone spoke up with a sigh. “Oh dearie me...listen to all those ridiculous tips.”

“Hm?” Allen turned around to find Miach standing there in her uniform.

Miach was a feline demi-human who delivered the mail to Allen’s mansion. She was shaking her head at them with a wry smile on her face, a far cry from her pristine business smile, with her cobalt green cat ears twitching.

“Oh, it’s you, Miach. Are you on a delivery?”

“Yessiree. This adventurers’ guild is one of our precious patrons too. Anyhoo...ya sure do look happy, Dark Lord.” Miach smiled warmly.

Since Miach came by the mansion every morning for deliveries, Allen had already told her about his confession to Charlotte. Though she was in a heartwarming, celebratory mood, Magus and Groh frowned at her.

“Hey there...you calling our advice ‘ridiculous’? What do you have against us, huh?”

“Yeah! We can’t let that pass.”

“It’s not that they’re *bad* ideas. I mean, they’re all perfectly acceptable plans you might find on some beginner’s guide to dating.” She nodded slowly, but then the corner of her lips twisted up, and she surveyed the crowd with a sardonic look. “But...you’re just sticking too close to textbook scenarios, y’see. I guess it’s just not very interesting, kinda run-of-the-mill, and your inexperience is showing...”

Miach’s words drilled mercilessly into the men’s hearts. Allen, of course, also took a little hit. He hunched his shoulders despondently and stared at his notes. “So this is too...bland? Then what’s the right way to go about it?”

“There really is no right answer,” Miach said, looking at Allen with an overly kind air and patting his shoulder. “The important part is what *you* want to do for her, y’see. What ya should look to isn’t some manual, but the days you’ve shared with Charlotte so far.”

“The day’s I’ve shared...”

“That’s right. So, whaddaya want to do to make Charlotte happy, Dark Lord?”

“What do I...want to do...for Charlotte...” Allen chewed on Miach’s

question. What *did* he want to do? Since the day they met, his answer hadn't changed. "I want to teach her all the naughty pleasures of this world, and make her a captive of those delights, so that she won't be able to live without the naughty things I show her!"

"There's a better way to put that, you know!" Groh cut in.

"Sorry, everyone," Magus said to the other people around them, who were clearly creeped out by Allen's declaration. "His words and actions are hopelessly villainous, but he's actually a good guy at heart...so could you please hold off on reporting him to the authorities?"

Meanwhile, Miach nodded in satisfaction. "There ya go. That's the Dark Lord I know! Don't cha worry, ya don't have to bend over backwards and be all proper. Just be yourself."

"Thanks, Miach! You're a lifesaver..." Allen grabbed her hands and thanked her, his voice shrill. All the doubts that had plagued his mind vanished like they were never there. His view was clear, as though he'd reached enlightenment.

But just then, a timid voice called to him from behind.

"A-Allen?"

Charlotte was standing behind him. She was dressed in her usual outing attire, but she was dazzling to Allen's eyes.

He gulped and slowly opened his mouth. "Ah, there you are. You already finished the test? How was it?"

"Yes. It was all fine..." Charlotte said, glancing back at Gosetsu and Roo.

Gosetsu had a brand new bandana around her neck, looking pleased. She chuckled. "*It was as trivial as child's play.*"

"*Put yourself in my shoes, Granny, I had to make sure you wouldn't overdo it,*" Roo quipped. "*Here you go, you can have an apple now that you're done.*"

"Ah, much obliged, Young Roo."

Roo tossed Gosetsu an apple. The two of them were officially approved attendants for Charlotte now. They made a surprisingly good pair. Perhaps because she had so many siblings, Roo was good at taking care of others. While Gosetsu was a perfect guard, Roo was a perfect caregiver.

Despite the successful test, Charlotte looked somewhat downcast.

"What is it? Did something happen?" Allen asked.

"U-Um...well..." Charlotte knitted her brows, stealing anxious glances at Allen.

Meanwhile, Miach became agitated. "Uh, hey, Dark Lord...!"

Allen was cocking his head at the puzzling situation when Charlotte finally decided to say, with a melancholy smile, "Um, I see you're talking with Miach? I'll just go over there and wait for you with

Roo and Gosetsu.”

“Huh? Why—” Allen was about to say, “Why would you go away?” when he gasped in realization. He was still gripping Miach’s hands. He stepped back from Miach right away and grabbed Charlotte’s hands instead.

“Oh!” Charlotte squeaked.

“It’s not what you think! It meant nothing!!!” he explained desperately, looking straight into her eyes. “I was just asking Miach for some advice, that’s all. There’s nothing to it. I swear to all the gods in the universe, you’re the only one for me. Please, will you believe me?”

“Oh, um, uh...y-yes...” Charlotte mumbled, turning bright red and looking at her feet.

Allen breathed a sigh of relief, while the people in the bar awww-ed at the heartwarming yet slightly embarrassing scene. As Allen and Charlotte looked into each other’s eyes, Magus and Groh whispered to Miach.

“Hey, is playing it safe really bad when you go on a date?”

“Oh no, in all honesty, it’s all right. A lot better than going over the top and making a mess out of it.”

“Why’d you trash us back there then?”

“Ya know...imagine Dark Lord trying to pull off some proper normal date. He’s bound to get so nervous and ruin everything. He’s much better off being himself, y’see.”

“Ah...true, he’s the type to go weak at the last minute, after all.”

“Wow, you’re a great judge of character.”

Allen could hear the rude, whispered conversation, but he ignored them. Still holding Charlotte’s hands, he said solemnly, “So, Charlotte...”

“Y-Yes...?” Charlotte tilted her head anxiously.

Everything about her sparkled like stardust in Allen’s eyes: the tilt of her face, her faintly uncertain eyes, her slightly parted lips, the small part of her white teeth that he could see.

Th-This is odd...was she always so adorable? Ever since they’d confessed their feelings to each other, he was completely bewitched by her charms. Allen couldn’t help but gulp loudly. He almost swallowed back the words he meant to say, but he blurted it out at the top of his voice.

“Please! Will you...go on a date with me?!”

Charlotte froze at his words. “Huh?”

“Oh, o-only if you don’t mind—” Allen added hastily.

“O-Of course, I wouldn’t mind...a date...with you...” Charlotte blushed, and gave a small, shy smile. “I-I would...love to. Yes...please.”

An electric shock shot through Allen's body. He was overcome by an urge to sweep her up in his arms then and there and take her around the town...but he was too rooted to the spot to put it into action. "R-Right. How about tomorrow, then? Let's go out tomorrow. Just the two of us."

"Y-Yes. The two of us, together." The pair spoke to each other like a pair of malfunctioning automatons.

"*Guess that means we stay home...*" Roo murmured.

"*There is no other way, I'm afraid,*" Gosetsu agreed. "*It would be unthinkable to get in the way of their very first tryst.*"

Roo, Gosetsu, and even the other people in the bar looked on at the fresh lovers with warm gazes.

In the meantime, Allen was savoring the rush of joy welling up in him. *I'm so glad I confessed to her! I'm the happiest man in the world!* He hadn't even gone on a date yet, but he was already at the peak of his bliss. What would come over him when they did go on the date? He could only picture death—his own heart bursting from happiness—but he felt it would be a contented end to his life.

Just as these whimsical thoughts were floating in his head, Allen caught his breath a little at a sudden burst of animosity in the air. It was definitely the aura of someone's hostility, an intent to kill. It was fleeting and subtle, so the only ones who noticed it were Allen, Roo, and Gosetsu. The two beasts held their tongues, glancing around surreptitiously.

"Allen? Is something wrong?" Charlotte asked.

"Uh, no, it's nothing," Allen assured her with a smile. *There's no doubt about it... That animosity was definitely directed at us.* Allen let his eyes fall on a table nearby. The row of jugs on it reflected the rest of the bar. He could make out the people who were smiling at them, the waitresses who were keeping their distance, others who were partying in their own circles...and in one corner, a therianthrope sat by himself, drinking cheap alcohol.

The half-beast, half-human chimera was covered in short black fur, and he had the face of a leopard, with an eye patch over his right eye. He was staring intently in Allen and Charlotte's direction. And in his hand, he held a single sheet of paper.

It was unmistakable—he was gripping Charlotte's wanted poster.



Later that evening, in the small hours of the night, Allen, Roo, and Gosetsu held a secret meeting in the living room after Charlotte had gone to sleep. Darkness obscured most of the room, and only a single lantern lit their faces. Even the insects in the garden seemed to be hushed.

Allen tossed a pile of papers on the low table. With a sigh, he uttered the name of the enemy they had seen at the adventurers' guild that afternoon. "That therianthrope goes by the name of Ricardo Uber. A bounty hunter."

"Bounty hunter?" Roo cocked her head quizzically.

"Put simply, they capture criminals for the reward money," Gosetsu explained. She opened her eyes just a crack and stared at Allen. "You mean to say, this Ricardo fellow is after Lady Charlotte. Do I understand you correctly?"

"That would be the reasonable conclusion..." Allen flumped down on the sofa with a heavy sigh.

It had been easy to figure out the leopard-man's name at the adventurers' guild. Apparently, he was a well-known fighter, infamous for his ruthless and efficient methods for collecting bounties. In any case, from the moment Allen decided to take Charlotte in, he expected this troublesome scenario. The bounty on her was quite a considerable sum, and even though the coverage of her scandal had died down in the papers, a bounty hunter would still be interested in capturing her.

But the timing...talk about a curveball, Allen thought. They had finally become official, and he even managed to promise her a date. Then out of the blue, a new enemy came into the picture. It was like a roller coaster ride from heaven to hell. He didn't know what to do.

"Hunh. Well, no problem," Roo said casually. "We can just gobble him up! I can do it in one gulp!"

"It's not that easy..." Allen shook his head. "The word is, he has a private army behind him. They always hunt as a pack. But I couldn't get any intel on how many of them there are. If we let even one of them slip away, they might leak Charlotte's whereabouts."

"Hmm. In other words, we need to eradicate them to the roots," Gosetsu observed with a nod.

"Exactly. And here's the most important part." Allen looked at the two beasts and held up his finger. "We can't kill any of them. Under any circumstances."

"Hum...? What a strange line to draw," Gosetsu chuckled. "I didn't have the impression that you were so humane. Why ever should we have mercy for the enemy?"

"Of course, I've had times when I narrowly escaped death. I won't say I've never taken another life." Allen wasn't skillful enough to hold back against an enemy who was attacking to kill. If there was no reason to stop him, he would sometimes demolish the enemy completely. "But this has to do with Charlotte. If she found out that someone lost their life because of her...she'd definitely agonize over it."

Even if she never found out, he wanted to avoid doing anything

that would cast shadow over her life. Ideally, he wanted her to keep smiling as always, without knowing any painful truths, without staining her innocence. That was all he wished for.

“So we’ll lure out all the enemies and round them up without killing them. Afterward, I’ll cast a brainwashing spell on all of them to make them forget everything they know about Charlotte. That way, we can remove all the possible dangers.”

“You make it sound so easy,” Roo said.

“Are you against it, Roo?”

“Course not.” Roo shook her head and looked at Allen sharply. *“If it’d make Mommy sad, I wouldn’t eat anybody. Leave it to me—I can catch live enemies just fine.”*

“Good, thanks for your help.”

“I’m not doing it for you. It’s for Mommy,” Roo retorted, looking away.

Though Roo talked a big talk, she was being honest, through and through when she said she was doing it for Charlotte. She looked determined to do anything she could. Allen lightly patted her head and looked at Gosetsu. “And? What about you, Gosetsu?”

“Of course, I am at your service.” Gosetsu bowed deeply. Then, with a small sigh, she said, *“What I did the other day, when I hoped to secure Lady Charlotte’s happiness, was reckless... I am truly ashamed of myself. Now I see that no one can care about her as much as you do, Sir Allen.”*

“Hmph, you finally got it.” Allen leaned back on the sofa, looking smug. “It’s only natural. After all, I’m Charlotte’s...Charlotte’s, um, well...you know.”

“You’re wondering whether to say ‘guardian’ or ‘boyfriend,’ aren’t you?” Gosetsu said, a touch of disgust in her voice.

“That’s what I mean when I say you’re a creep, you know that?” Roo added.

“Ugh, quiet! Back to business: what do we do about the enemy?!” As the two beasts gave him withering looks, Allen steered the conversation back to the issue. He and Charlotte had only been in a relationship for a week now—it took quite a bit of courage for Allen to call himself her “boyfriend.” In any case, he barreled on with the discussion. “I casually asked around about the Ricardo guy. Apparently, he’s been staying in that city for about a month now.”

“He’s been there that long? Why’s he targeting Mommy now?”

“It seems he was investigating by himself until now.” First, Ricardo, the head of the pack, probed around the target. He took time observing everything, and when he saw a chance to attack, he gathered all his henchmen and they went on the hunt together. That was apparently the way they operated. “The people at the adventurer’s guild told me that in the last few days, they’ve been

seeing more and more therianthropes like Ricardo around town. It looks like they're scheming to launch an attack soon."

"Oh yeah? They think they can take us on, huh?" Roo snarled.

It was true that Charlotte was surrounded by a powerful wizard, a Fenrir, and an Infernal Capybara. While Allen had to admit the bounty hunters might have numbers on their side, they were up against quite the heavyweight opponents.

"Hmm..." Gosetsu stroked her chin and looked up at the ceiling.

"Are they on a foolhardy suicide mission, or do they have the skills to match their confidence? It could be either."

"Exactly. So we have to deal with them ourselves," Allen said.

"You mean we won't say anything to that cat lady or those big guys?" Roo asked.

"They couldn't sense Ricardo's animosity in the air. Let's keep this to ourselves." No one else except the three of them had noticed Ricardo in the bar. Getting Miach and the others involved would only place them in danger.

It wouldn't be a bad idea to ask Eluka, Uncle, or Aunt for help...but that would take time, Allen thought. His adoptive sister, Eluka, was already investigating Neils Kingdom for him, and his adoptive parents were busy people. They wouldn't be able to drop their plans immediately, even if it was a favor for Allen.

That left the three of them as the only ones who were ready to respond to the attack. And if they were to go on the offensive, the earlier the better. "I'm thinking of making a move tomorrow," he said.

"Tomorrow...? You don't mean..." Roo gasped.

"I do mean," Allen declared boldly with a fearless grin.

"Tomorrow, I'll go on a date with Charlotte, lure out all the enemies...and we'll round up every single one of them! And of course, we'll keep it all a secret from Charlotte!"

"Are you crazy?!" Roo exclaimed.

"Quite the contrary. Out of all the scenarios I considered, this is the most efficient."

Since Allen and the beasts couldn't be sure when the enemy would attack, they could create an opportunity their opponents couldn't refuse. That way, it would be easier to deal with the hunters, and they should be able to capture every last one. In that sense, a date was a perfect occasion. Allen and Charlotte would be by themselves, and an air of positively blissful ignorance would radiate from them.

When Allen shared his idea, Gosetsu squinted at him. "*Wouldn't that amount to using Lady Charlotte as bait?*"

"I can't deny that. I'll protect her at all costs, but it will still be risky." Allen could say no more. Gosetsu was right—this plan was like using Charlotte as a decoy. It would have been ideal if she could hide

at home until they could be sure of her safety, but there was a reason Allen didn't see that as a viable option. Pressing a hand to his forehead, he groaned, "You saw how excited she was about our date tomorrow... How could I ask her to postpone it for an unspecified length of time because some bounty hunters are after her?"

"Ah...I see." Gosetsu nodded in deep understanding.

Since Allen had invited her to a date, Charlotte had been restless all day. Even during dinner, she kept blushing and going quiet every time her eyes met his. On top of that, she'd started getting ready for bed and taking a bath much earlier than usual, and after telling him, "I...um...I don't know what to do, but I'll be looking forward to tomorrow!" she'd scurried away to hide in her room.

"I get it..." Roo murmured somberly. *"Mommy was picking out her outfit and accessories for tomorrow, all the way up till she went to bed."*

"And she even asked me to sing her a lullaby, as she was too excited to sleep," Gosetsu added.

"Right? Right? Ah...I mean, seriously..." Allen looked up at the ceiling, his face shining. "My girlfriend is so cute it hurts."

"Hey Granny. Can I just bite him?" Roo growled.

"That won't do, Young Roo. He may be ridiculous, but we still need him for the battle." Gosetsu patted Roo to soothe her.

Even as the two beasts cast him cold looks, Allen wallowed in the sweetness of his lover. *She's really looking forward to it. I must do everything I can to make our first date a success.*

"She's the kind of person who rejects my confession of love because she feels she might be a burden to me," Allen said. "If she found out that someone's after her, she'd be even more worried. So we have to deal with the problem in secret and smooth it over like nothing happened."

"Well, I believe you're correct there..." Gosetsu nodded slowly. All three of them knew Charlotte well.

"Charlotte and I will have a normal date tomorrow. You two can shadow us. If you spot anyone acting suspicious, you can capture them alive. I'll do my best to deal with them too."

"And all the while, we can't let Lady Charlotte detect anything, is that right?"

"Hmm, that would be best...but don't we stand out?" Roo asked.

"Not to worry. I'll put a spell on both of you," Allen answered. What he had in mind was deception magic, which made things invisible or appear to be something else in the viewer's eyes. Though it was of little use in a battle, the ability to disguise anything in any way was perfect for an undercover mission like this. "I'll make you look like a little puppy or something, Roo... As for Gosetsu, do you have any requests?"

“There’s no need for a spell,” Gosetsu slowly shook her head. *“I can truly feel just how deeply you care for Lady Charlotte. Allow me, then, to lend you a hand in this endeavor.”*

“Uh, well...I think it’s better if you just go along with my plan, though,” Allen said. Since he knew how much Gosetsu could overdo it from the incident at the cave, having her on the team only made him more anxious. In fact, he wondered if having her involved in this scheme would present too great a risk.

Gosetsu rose to her feet, ignoring Allen’s frown. *“Your humble Gosetsu will do everything I can to support your tryst. As the ancient proverb goes, ‘Those who hinder the romance between lovers shall face the wrath of the Infernal Capybaras.’”*

“I’ve never heard of such a saying...?” Allen said dubiously.

“I’m not surprised. I just thought of it now.”

“Hey.”

“Well well, no matter. Now, watch closely.” Putting her hooves together in front of her, she gravely intoned, *“The Secret Technique of the Way of the Rodent of Infernal Forests...Undulating Waters!”*

With a pop, Gosetsu disappeared, enshrouded by a thick plume of smoke.

“Whoa?!” Allen exclaimed.

The smoke lifted eventually, and a figure slowly emerged...

“Hmph. It’s an art of transformation that I mastered in order to enjoy what humans call ‘gourmet food’ in cities,” Gosetsu explained, “but I never expected it would see the light of day for such an occasion.”

Gosetsu had transformed into a human, and there was no other way to describe her but as an alluring woman of extraordinary beauty. She appeared to be in her early twenties, dressed in a chic evening dress. Her sweet, gentle eyes and lush lips were terribly alluring. Though she still had a faint scar shaped like an X on her forehead, it only added to her appeal as a dangerous seductress. Her flaxen hair rolled down to her waist in loose waves, accentuating her well-balanced figure.

The gorgeous woman smiled elegantly and announced in a chiming voice, “If I stay in this form, it shall be easy work to make the bounty hunters drop their guard. I will protect your tryst at all costs, and I will round up the enemy in no time, I assure you.”



“...”

“...”

Allen and Roo were both frozen in place, rendered utterly speechless.

In time, however, Allen let out a heavy sigh and clapped his hands together in an effort to lift his spirits. “All right, that’s settled then. I’ll explain what I have in mind for our date. I’ll be counting on you, Roo.”

“You betcha. Anything for Mommy,” Roo said eagerly.

The beauty—Gosetsu—looked at the two of them cheering each other up, and shrugged wearily. “Now now, no comment at all? Young people these days, it seems they don’t care enough to treat the elderly well.”

“You...just be quiet for a while. I’m not kidding,” Allen snapped.

“Sorry Granny, but I’m with Allen on this one,” Roo added.

There was far too much to “comment” on; they didn’t even know where to start.



The morning of the battle was clear and bright. The summer sun radiated intensely, and leaves rustled in the gentle breeze.

Allen was perched in the sunlight streaming in from the window, reading—or pretending to read—a newspaper in the living room. His brain registered nothing of the words on the page. He was visibly nervous and stiff.

The living room door opened a little, and Charlotte peered in. “Oh, g-good morning...”

“Ah. M-Morning.” Allen’s heart lurched violently to see her. She was still in her pajamas, her hair tousled, as if she had just slipped out of bed. He had seen her like this many times since they’d started living together, but once he became conscious of his feelings for her, he was utterly defenseless in little moments like this.

Unaware of Allen’s jumpiness, Charlotte looked around the room and tilted her head. “Um, have you seen Roo and Gosetsu? They were gone when I woke up.”

“Don’t worry about those two.” Allen folded the paper and shrugged. “They’ve gone out for the day. I think they mentioned training with other magical beasts around Cave Toor, or something along those lines.”

“Really?”

“They said they made the plans after you went to sleep. They set off early this morning,” Allen explained in as flat a tone as he could muster. Of course, this was all a lie. He was breaking out in a cold

sweat, worried that she might see through it.

But Charlotte beamed softly. "Th-That means..."

"Hm?"

"We're...we're all alone...today..."

"Uh...yes, looks like it..." Allen scratched his head and stood up. He walked over to Charlotte and looked into her eyes. She seemed somewhat nervous. "Um, Charlotte."

"Y-Yes?"

"To be honest, I don't have much experience in things like this. I've never gone out with anyone, so this is all new to me. So, uh...you know." He hesitated for a moment, then said with a sigh. "I want you to have a fun time, but...frankly, you might be disappointed. If you ever feel that way, feel free to—"

"I'm sure that would never happen," Charlotte assured him with a smile, and gently took Allen's hands. Though her hands were trembling a little from nerves, he felt a soothing warmth through them, melting away his anxieties. Turning bright red, she spoke falteringly but in earnest, "I'm the same—I never...even imagined I'd fall in love. So, um, I'm...I'm just happy...to be with you, Allen."

"Charlotte..." Allen nodded solemnly. "I'm really glad to hear that. However..." He grinned and squeezed her hands. "I can't go too easy on myself just because you say so. I promise, I'll throw my heart and soul into making sure you have the best time! Even better than the naughty pleasures I've already taught you!"

"Hee hee... I'll be looking forward to it," Charlotte giggled. But she soon came to herself and let go of Allen's hands. "Ah, I'll go get ready for our outing. I'm sorry to keep you waiting."

"Don't worry, none of the shops are open this early anyway. Take your time. We can have a slow breakfast, and then get going."

"Okay!" Charlotte smiled from ear to ear and pattered out of the room.

Allen watched her go with a smile. When she was gone, he crumpled to the floor, burying his face in his hands. "She's so cute I'm gonna die!!!" He'd already known that she was adorable. And yet she continued to level up her cuteness every second. He was convinced that no sane human could bear to behold such a lovable being. Writhing on the floor, he shouted outside the window. "Did you two see that?! My dearest girlfriend...how wholesome, how adorable she is!"

A stunning woman and a white, medium-sized puppy peered in from the window.

"Yes, yes, we heard you," said Gosetsu in her human form.

"*Are you literally weeping...?*" muttered Roo, transformed by Allen's spell.

They had been up since the crack of dawn, ready to trail the pair on their date. They eyed Allen on the floor with a dubious look. *"You sure you can protect Mommy when you're behaving like this?"* Roo grumbled.

Allen slowly rose to his feet and clenched his fists. "Naturally." His interaction with Charlotte had only strengthened his resolve to carry out his date to perfection. His eyes blazed with determination. "Just you watch! I'll do everything flawlessly, both our date and the utter destruction of our enemy! That's what I call a true man!"

Allen's stratagem was extremely simple. First, he'd amble about the town with Charlotte. If the enemy struck, he'd strike back, and they'd continue their date. Then he'd repeat this process until the end. In other words, it was like going fishing. There was no guarantee that the bounty hunters would bite. Still, they were doubly protected by Roo and Gosetsu.

And so, Allen had decided to focus all his attention on the date first and foremost, but as soon as they arrived in the city, he realized that things may not go as planned. The town was bustling as always. There were small families, big families, bands of adventurers, and couples like Allen and Charlotte. With the buzzing crowd in front of them, Allen turned to Charlotte and said, "Right then. Let's get started—uh, what's wrong?"

"Um..." Charlotte had pulled her hat down low over her eyes, and she was looking around furtively. Allen hadn't put a camouflage spell on her, so her hair was her usual blonde. She glanced up at Allen anxiously. "Is it really okay...for me to go out like this?"

"Uh-huh. It's not a problem anymore," Allen answered calmly. He'd judged that there was no longer any need for her to disguise herself in the city. "There are no more of your wanted posters up in town. It's been quite a long time since the news broke out, so you shouldn't have to wear a disguise anymore."

"B-But..." Charlotte still seemed unsure, and she shrank back.

"Oh?" Just then, a woman lugging an oversized backpack approached them. She appeared to be a peddler, and her bold, carefree look was familiar to Allen.

Allen greeted her, raising his hand. "Ah, you're the accessory shop owner from a few months ago."

"I haven't seen you in a while, Dark Overlord," she answered with a light nod. She was the owner of the street stall where he had bought a hair ornament for Charlotte on their first venture out into the city. "And you too, young lady—hmm?" She looked at Charlotte and cocked her head a little. Charlotte flinched at her reaction, but the shop owner smiled widely. "You've dyed your hair, huh? A nice change of mood?"

“Oh!”

“That color suits you better, I think. My hair ornament looks happy too.” She smiled at the ornament pinned in Charlotte’s blonde hair. She bowed before Charlotte could respond. “Well, I better get going. I’m usually in the same spot, so I hope I’ll see you again at my stall.”

“Of course. We’ll pop by later on,” Allen said. After they parted from the shop owner, he grinned at Charlotte. “See? Just like that. The people around here know what you look like with black hair. Even if you walk around without your disguise, they’re just going to think you’ve dyed it blonde for a change.”

“I-I see...” Charlotte nodded eagerly.

Allen smiled sheepishly at her innocence and gently stroked her head. “Besides, there was nothing shady about you to begin with. You never should have had to go into hiding like that.”

“Thank you...” she smiled and raised her face again. Allen was relieved to see that she felt more comfortable now.

“Right. So let’s go, but before we do...” He held out his hand to her.

“Wh-What is it?” she asked in surprise.

He realized he’d said too little. He braced himself and started over. “Uh...let’s hold hands so we don’t lose each other.”

“Oh...okay.”

They had visited this town together many times before. They’d never lost sight of each other, and even if they had, all they’d need to do is return to the mansion. So Charlotte knew it was just an excuse.

She timidly took his hand and smiled shyly. “Hee hee...yes, we can’t lose each other this way.”

“Uh-huh. Just to be safe.” Allen smiled back awkwardly.

The pair started walking slowly down the street, holding hands.

Ah...my girlfriend is so sweet and lovable, she has such small hands, and it’s insanely cute that her hand is a little sweaty from nerves... Argh, I just wish all the animosity would disappear!!! Internally, Allen’s rage blew up.

He had noticed that something was wrong as soon as they’d arrived in town. Sharp needles of enmity pricked them from all directions. It was of a different quality from the envious glares that couples might usually get. It was the real kind of animosity, an intent to kill—the kind one would only encounter in a battlefield, that made one’s hair stand on end. What was worse, the agents themselves were all rather subtle, and there were so many of them around that Allen couldn’t quite grasp the full extent of the army.

This must be Ricardo’s pack of hunters. Apparently, they were eager to pounce on the couple all at once. *Hah...fine. If they want a fight, I*

won't hold back. I'll crush them with all my strength!

Allen's mouth was curling into a dark smirk when Charlotte turned to him with a blush and said, "Hee hee, this is fun, Allen." So his face melted into a honey-sweet smile instead.

First, Allen led her to an alley away from the main street. There were only a few people walking here and there, and it was lined with ordinary houses. Charlotte looked around quizzically, but she held his hand tight and followed along.

"Where are we going, Allen?"

"I thought we might do a bit of shopping. Ah, here we are."

"Here...?"

Allen was pointing to a narrow path that branched off from the alley. Bordered by buildings on both sides, it gave off a somewhat dark, damp atmosphere. But Allen pressed on without hesitation.

At the end of the path stood a small, shabby shed. When Allen opened the door, Charlotte gasped with wide-open eyes. "Wow...!"

There was a vast expanse on the other side of the door. Shelves upon shelves containing various items like dry herbs and flowers, minerals, and so on, lined the walls on all sides, across the three-floored soaring lobby of the atrium. Besides the natural objects, there were also crystals and other mysterious items hovering in midair as well as blobs of slime sticking to the walls, making the place look like a museum of miscellaneous wonders. And this view spread out before them as far as the eye could see.

For Allen, it was a familiar spot, but it was the first time he'd brought Charlotte. She looked around with round eyes, her mouth hanging open.

"I-It didn't look like such a big building from outside... How does this work?" she asked.

"They twist the space with magic. More importantly..." For now, Allen let go of her hand and looked around. From a quick glance, it didn't look like anyone was nearby. "Hey, it's me," he finally said. "Anyone here?"

"Oh, is that you, Mr. Allen?" someone called down from the second floor.

Charlotte and Allen looked up to see a young man in a wheelchair popping out from behind a pile of miscellaneous objects. He had shoulder-length auburn hair, and wore a gentle smile on his face.

"This is new—you hardly ever come down to the shop yourself. Was there something you wanted to tell us about your potions?"

Allen shook his head. "No, I'm looking to buy something. Is the owner here?"

"Boss is out stocking up on some items. I'd be happy to help if I can. Please wait there, I'll be right down." The wheelchair lifted up

into the air and floated down to the first floor, coming to a slow stop in front of Allen and Charlotte. The young man gave a light bow to Charlotte. "Hello there. You must be Charlotte. Nice to meet you."

"Y-Yes. Nice to meet you too...?" Charlotte bowed timidly. She stared at his face and tilted her head in puzzlement. "Umm...haven't we met somewhere before?"

"Yes, he's that boy," Allen said, "the one Eluka was pestering with questions in the city that time."

"Um...ah! I remember now!"

"I'm Jill Constance. Pleased to make your acquaintance."

Some time ago, Allen, Charlotte, and Eluka had come to the city together. Eluka had ecstatically approached Jill, intrigued by the young man's wheelchair.

"This is a shop of enchanted objects, and Jill works here," Allen explained.

"I'm still new, though. Just started about a month ago. Eluka introduced me to the owner."

"I see...so these are enchanted objects." Charlotte peered around with even more curiosity.

"Speaking of Eluka," Allen said with a mystified frown, "she's been away for a while... She hasn't written me so much as a line." He'd asked Eluka to look into Charlotte's homeland, the Kingdom of Neils, but she hadn't sent any news since she left.

"Ah. She wrote to me that she'll be back soon," Jill said.

"Really? But why would she write to you and not me...?" Allen asked.

"Oh..." Jill's smile froze in place. "Um...Eluka hasn't mentioned anything?"

"About what?"

Jill's face turned bashful, then serious. "Aha... In that case, I'll have to pay you a proper visit at some point."

"Again, what is this about?" Allen pressed, but when he saw that Jill had no intention of elaborating, he let the matter drop. "Never mind. I'm here to buy something for Charlotte today."

"Oh! F-For me?" Charlotte looked startled that the talk had suddenly turned to her.

"Yes, for you." Allen smiled at her with a nod. "I thought it might be about time you started learning some magic."

"Magic...?"

"Indeed. You do have Roo and Gosetsu around, but the more ways you have to protect yourself, the better, right?"

Allen and the two beasts would protect Charlotte with their lives. But still, he thought Charlotte would feel more at ease wherever she went if she had some combat skills herself. She clearly had the gift of

a beast tamer, so he had a hunch that she would be quick to learn magic as well.

“Besides...” He put a hand on her shoulder and said with a bright smile, “the sheer delight of hurling a piece of offensive magic at people who rub you the wrong way is one of the greatest naughty pleasures of this world. I want you to experience that rush.”

“Um, okay...”

“I have a feeling that’s a pleasure only certain people feel...” Jill said with a slightly disconcerted expression that was quickly replaced by a bright, customer service smile. “Anyway, I suppose you’re looking for a beginner’s wand, in that case? I’ll show you some of our stock.”

“Which part of the shop is it in? We’ll go and look for it—it’ll be nice to stroll the aisles,” Allen said.

“One moment, let me draw a map for you.” Jill took out a pen and paper, and drew the path to the wands section. The shop was extremely spacious, and even Allen, who had been there several times before, didn’t have the whole floor plan in his head. Some visitors even got lost from time to time. “Here you go. If you can’t find it, just give me a shout. I’ll be right over.”

“Thanks. By the way, there’s something I want to ask...”

“Yes?”

“How many people are in the shop right now?” Allen whispered in Jill’s ear.

“Besides our regular customers, perhaps a little more than ten.”

“Hm. They’re all probably *my* ‘customers.’ You don’t have to lift a finger.”

“Ah, I see. But will you be fine by yourself?”

“Of course. I have backup.”

“If that’s the case, I’ll take you up on your offer.” Jill nodded calmly. “I was just wondering how I should handle this many people without the boss around.”

A hush descended on the shop. In the calm and peaceful air, Allen felt the same sharp yet subtle pricks of animosity he’d sensed in the city streets.

With no further questions, Jill saw them off with a smile. “Take care.”

“Yeah, see you later,” Allen replied.

“Thank you for your help,” Charlotte said with a bow to Jill.

The pair started walking again. Unlike the city streets, they didn’t pass anyone in the aisles. Charlotte seemed fascinated by the items that filled the shelves. She kept glancing around restlessly. “But Allen,” she said anxiously, “do you think I can use magic at all? I don’t even have a clue what all these things are.”

“That’s nothing; you can learn bit by bit. Even a child can use magic if it’s beginner level.” Allen smiled at her encouragingly. “As a matter of fact, soon after I met you, I had the idea to teach you magic.” In the very beginning, when he’d taken her in, he hadn’t expected she would stay with him for so long. So his first thought was to teach her survival skills. But he’d held off until now.

“There were so many things more important than magic to teach you,” Allen went on, “so all my attention went into that.”

“You mean...naughty pleasures?”

“Exactly. What you truly needed back then weren’t survival skills...but to learn how to relax and have fun,” Allen said with a playful shrug. “At first, it was hard work. I mean, when I told you to do whatever you liked, you just sat there and counted the grains on the floorboards.”

“Eep...but I didn’t know how else to spend my time back then.” Charlotte blushed, looking embarrassed. But she soon gripped her fists and looked up. “Now I’m different, though. If I have the time, I can do naughty things all by myself!”

“Hm, for example?”

“W-Well, let me see. Brushing Roo’s hair, reading a book, practicing cooking, and...” Charlotte paused a little and looked up meekly at Allen’s face. “Staring at your face while you’re having a nap...?”

“Uh...do you really do that?”

“N-Not often! J-Just once or twice!” she stammered. She might as well have admitted to doing it countless times.

Oh well...it’s a good thing she’s changed so much. Allen felt somewhat embarrassed, but the fact made him happy. She won’t ever have to sit counting the lines on the floorboards again. But suddenly, another thought struck him. “Hey, we only started going out about a week ago, didn’t we?”

“Huh? Um, yes. Why do you ask...?”

“I haven’t taken a single nap in the past week...” Allen cocked his head and asked straight out, “When was it that you were looking at me napping?”

“...”

“Tell me, when was it? Does that mean you already liked me way before I realized how I felt about yo—”

“Ah! Look, Allen! I see a lot of wands over there!” She cut him off and pointed in a random direction. But she turned out to be right: she was actually pointing to shelves with various wands. “That must be the shelves Jill drew on his map!” Charlotte rattled on, bright red in the face. “Hurry, let’s go take a look!”

“Hang on, answer my question first. Tell me, Charlotte. Since

when? Also, you're welcome to stare at me when I'm awake too, you know."

"Oh, b-but I'd feel too shy because you look so handsome and—never mind! Let's go!" Charlotte broke into a run.

"I see how it is..." Allen murmured, following after her in leisurely steps. He knew his face was melting into a headier grin than usual, but he couldn't do anything about it.

The flirtatious lovebirds came to a corner with a glass case like a museum exhibit, displaying neat rows of wands. Charlotte peered in and breathed a sigh of admiration. "Wow...they're beautiful. Are they all magic wands?"

Some were made of wood, some carved from white stone, others encrusted with jewels. They were all magic wands, but each one had their own character. Some bore the mark of their craftsperson, and Charlotte looked at them in wonder.

"Oh yes," Allen said with a nod. "These wands are all good for supporting beginners."

"Are there other kinds?"

Allen flipped into teaching mode. "Indeed. For example, there are wands that have fire magic cast on them. Balls of fire come out just from swinging it." Such wands were one kind of enchanted object. Although the number of uses was limited, it allowed anyone to use magic casually, so it was a popular tool among adventurers. The wands in the cases before them, however, didn't have such obvious spells on them.

Allen pointed his forefinger to his head and explained, "In order to use magic, you have to concentrate your spirit and visualize what you want to do clearly in your mind. These wands help you do that."

"So...if I hold one of these wands, I'd get better at concentrating?"

"Well, in short, that's about right. Once you're used to casting spells, you'd be able to use magic without a wand, but when you're starting out, it's indispensable."

The wands helped beginners in other ways too, not just sharpening their focus. They had various effects, such as helping to strengthen the user's magic power, assisting the user with aim, and so on. Hence it was customary for beginners in magic to wield a wand.

Allen opened the glass case and gestured to Charlotte to come over. "You'd better try holding it in your hand then listen to me explain how it works. Go on, pick any one that calls to you."

"O-Okay. But they look expensive...do you think I could afford it with my wages?"

Allen waved her off. "Don't worry, it's our first date. I'll cover it."

"Mrr. But you always do that..." Charlotte grumbled. "I hardly use my monthly wages because you offer to pay for everything." Though

she looked a little concerned, she timidly reached for one of the wands. It was a thin, metallic wand with a blue crystal adorning the tip. It glittered, catching the lights in the shop. She held it up with both hands and tilted her head. "What do you think...?"

"Hm." Allen stroked his chin and assessed her. Then he twirled his index finger in the air. "Sorry. Can you do a little twirl?"

"S-Sure." She nodded with a serious expression, and spun around. Her skirt bloomed, and her golden hair fluttered in the air. She looked at him quizzically. "Does twirling tell you how good the wand is?"

"No, not particularly." Just seeing it in her hands was enough for him to tell whether the wand was a good fit. There was a much more important reason that he'd asked her to twirl. His face stern and serious, he said, "I just thought you'd look cute."

"Um...h-how was it?"

"I don't even need to spell it out." Allen put a hand on her shoulder, still completely serious, and said, "Of course it was unreasonably cute."

"Oh..." There was a little pop of heat as Charlotte's face went bright red. She squeezed the wand and shrank down meekly. "You're too kind... You don't have to flatter me, you know."

"Huh? Do you think I have enough tact to effectively use flattery?"

"Uh, hum...I-I don't think that's something you should say about yourself..." she mumbled, turning even redder and shrinking even smaller.

"Come on, don't look so down." Allen pressed on, "Show me more of your cute face. I'm going to stare at you for as long as you've been staring at my sleeping face."

"Ahh...you're getting me back for that, aren't you?! Please don't look so much...!"

She turned her back on him bashfully. He didn't want to tease her too much, so he let it drop. "Well, we can talk more about that later," he said with a smirk. "Let me show you how to use the wand—hm?"

"Oh!"

All the lights in the shop went out. They were surrounded by silent darkness, and Charlotte drew closer to Allen in surprise. The magical crystals, potions in test tubes, and enchanted objects on the shelves emitted hazy lights in the dark. In the soft illumination, Allen was close enough to Charlotte to make out her anxious face. He smiled softly at her.

"Don't worry so much. This kind of accident happens all the time here."

"Really?"

"Oh yes. Just wait a little while, and the lights will go back on.

But stay close to me.”

“Y-Yes. I hope it turns on soon.”

Allen had managed to convince her that it was only some malfunction of the lights, and he wasn’t exactly lying. This place was one of the most well-stocked enchanted objects shops in the country. It attracted many customers, but also many thieves. These kinds of accidents happened all the time.

The shop likely had tight security measures, but this time, the troublemakers were Allen’s prey. He would respectfully do his part and deal with it himself. *It was worth provoking them. Looks like it’s showtime.*

Indeed, Allen wasn’t just flirting with Charlotte on a whim. He was trying to show that he had his guard down, so that the enemy would see them as easy prey and hasten to attack. Exactly as he’d expected, the air around them was stretched taught now. It would only be a matter of seconds until they made the move.

Allen sneered, nodding in satisfaction at his effective trap. *And what a fun trap to set! Ah, my girlfriend is the most adorable in the world!*

As Miach had said, he didn’t need to act like someone he wasn’t. The two of them were just fine being themselves, as they’d always done. All he had to do was to keep teaching her all kinds of naughty pleasures because he wanted to see her happy or surprised faces.

And now, the destruction of the enemy was merely a small chore that had entered into their ordinary day. *But how to deal with them without letting Charlotte know...? Ah, I’ve got it!* He had a brilliant idea. With a bright smile, he whispered, “Right, we might as well make use of the dark. Let’s practice some magic.”

Charlotte still seemed a bit anxious. “Practice...?”

“Yes. The very first step. A spell to create light.”

He had in mind a piece of magic called *Lighting*. It didn’t involve heat, unlike making fire, and it was the kind of light that wouldn’t be extinguished by wind or rain, so it was a rather useful spell. Since it was also very easy to pick up, it was by far one of the most popular spells among ordinary citizens.

When Allen had explained all this, Charlotte’s eyes sparkled. “I’d love to try it! I want to be a cool wizard like you, Allen!”

“I welcome eager students with open arms. Let’s start the lesson then.” Allen smiled. When he had been a real instructor, he was infamous for his harsh, demanding methods, but this time, of course, he walked her through it step-by-step, his tone honey-sweet. “First, you close your eyes, and you imagine a light in your mind.”

“U-Um, what kind of image would that be?”

“You light a lantern in a pitch-black room. A scene like that. Make it as specific as you can, with a clear picture of the size of the light, its

strength, and so on.”

“I see... I’ll give it a try.” Charlotte closed her eyes, still gripping the wand with both hands. Her face was completely serious, but also filled with excitement to explore the unknown.

You...really have changed. What Allen had done for her was minimal. At the root of Charlotte’s growth was her own earnest will. He felt a fervent wish to protect her. *I’ll never forgive anyone who tries to snatch away what you’ve finally gained.*

He let out a small sigh and looked around. His eyes had already adjusted to the dark. Shadowy shapes began to shift in the gloom and take on sharper outlines. “All right, keep picturing the light in your head until I tell you to stop.”

“Okay!” she answered cheerfully.

At the same time, Allen snapped his fingers. “*Sylph Field.*” A wall of wind formed around Charlotte. This would protect her, and—more importantly—no noise outside the barrier would reach her ears.



Everything was ready. Allen whipped up his index finger toward the shadows and crooked it. *Come at me.*

In that instant, the dark outlines that had been hovering around them shot forward like bullets. Allen swung his robe with a flourish and began intoning a spell. It was a piece of advanced magic to make an electric shock streak over a wide area. Though it was a very powerful spell, the incantation was long. Before he could finish the first verse, one of the shadows flung itself toward Allen and—

“Gah?!” The enemy collapsed on the floor and lay there motionless. The other shadows met the same fate. Muffled groans came from all around Allen as the enemies fell to the floor one after another. They were therianthropes clothed from head to toe in black except for their eyes, which glinted through slits in the fabric.

“Mwa ha ha! Idiots! You fell for it!” Allen cackled, interrupting his own incantation. There was nothing to it. He had merely thrown needles laced with paralyzing poison when he swung his robe. The long-winded spell was just a bluff.

Don't they say, “If you're a wizard, fight like a wizard”? How ridiculous. The enemy knew Allen was a sorcerer, so they would expect him to attack with magic. So it followed that the wise tactic for him was to take them by surprise with a more mundane attack. Not to mention, sneaky attacks appealed to his sensibilities.

“Too bad for you, I don't have time for dignified measures!” Allen proclaimed. “I'll round up the rest of you in one sweep!”

Fierce animosity flared up just behind Allen. “Over my dead body!”

Before Allen could react, a woman's voice and a dog's bark rang out in the air.

“Pruning!”

“Warroof!”

Gosetsu and Roo mowed down the enemy, flinging him against the wall. The two had been keeping themselves hidden, but they were right there with him.

“Good! Cover my back!” Allen exclaimed.

“Ack...! To arms, everyone! Charge!” the leader yelled.

A wild rampage erupted.

In the midst of all the furor and explosions, screams and raging roars, Charlotte stood inside the wind cocoon, still keeping her eyes shut and trying to concentrate on the image of a light. “HMMMMM...a bright light...warm hot chocolate...staying up with Allen late at night...ah! Focus, Charlotte, focus...”

Eventually, Allen and Charlotte safely concluded their shopping, and he took her to the next destination. Now they sat face-to-face at a round table.

Allen stroked his chin and said, "All right then, I'll start with some ale...and you?"

"U-Um...I'm happy with water."

"Good. We'll have orange juice and ale, please," he said to the waiter.

"Yes sir," the waiter answered, bowing politely, and left their table.

"But I said water is fine..."

The waiter's mannerism was refined and perfectly efficient, befitting the place he served. Allen had brought Charlotte to a celebrated high-end restaurant in the city. The spacious dining hall was lined with many tables, and the gentle melody of a piano floated in the air. Although there was no dress code, it was the kind of restaurant where you had to peek in your wallet before stepping in.

Charlotte had been nervous since they arrived. She looked around restlessly and glanced back at him. "Allen. Is this...a very expensive restaurant?"

"Well, I wouldn't call it cheap. But it's not so much that you have to worry about the prices."

"I can't help worrying! You paid so much for the wand too..."

Charlotte's new wand was propped against the backrest of her chair. It was the metallic wand with a blue crystal on the tip that she had picked up first. It was perfect for her in length and weight, and they had settled on it in no time. She must have been watching when Allen handed over several gold coins in payment. Now her brows knitted anxiously.

Hm. She looks so cute I can keep watching her forever...but I should dispel any misunderstandings. Allen said, rummaging in his pockets, "Don't worry, the wand was only a small part of what I paid for. Look at this receipt." It was a good call that he'd asked Jill to prepare a receipt for him. It included a long list of the items that Allen had paid for.

"One magic wand...twenty bunches of herbs...seven numbing mushrooms...three tubes of liquid secretions from purple slimes...?" Charlotte read aloud, then looked up at him with round eyes. "Did you buy so many things? I didn't realize..."

"Uh-huh. I just thought of some items I needed."

"Are they ingredients for medicinal potions, by any chance?"

"You could say that." Allen smiled. In fact, they were items that had been destroyed in the melee. *They were weaklings, but they came in a big pack... I went a bit overboard,* Allen thought. The attackers had

numbered more than twenty. He thought he'd dealt with them as smoothly as possible, but he ended up causing some damage to the items in the shop. Still, that corner of the shop contained elementary enchanted objects, so the costs were relatively low.

In the end, the scuffle had only lasted a few minutes. By the time the lights came back on, Gosetsu and Roo had whisked away all the black-clad assailants, leaving Charlotte—with her eyes still shut—and Allen standing between slightly disheveled shelves.

Allen had waited for the right moment to undo the wind barrier spell, then told Charlotte to open her eyes. "Good, you've pictured it enough. Now repeat the spell after me."

"O-Okay." None the wiser, Charlotte opened her eyes and repeated the spell in a tense voice. "Um...*Lighting!*"

A warm light as big as her palm appeared before her eyes.

"Wow, look Allen! It's small, but I made a light!" she exclaimed.

"Indeed. You're an excellent student, just as I thought." Allen nodded with a smile as he looked intently at her very first piece of magic.

And so, Allen, Gosetsu, and Roo had succeeded in wiping out the enemy without giving anything away to Charlotte. It was all going according to his expectations—including the part about her feeling hesitant in the grandeur of the restaurant. The receipt seemed to have set her mind at rest about the wand's price, but the restaurant still made her uneasy.

"I really would have been happy with a normal restaurant," she murmured anxiously. "If I'm with you, I'm happy eating anywhere."

"Well, that's how I felt too, but according to my research, this place met the conditions best of all."

"Conditions...?"

"Excuse me." The same waiter returned with their drinks. He carefully placed the glasses of ale and juice on their table and reverently presented the menu to them. "Here is our menu. Please let me know if you have any requests."

"Thanks." Allen turned to Charlotte when the waiter was gone. "I wanted you to try the food here."

"What is it...?" Charlotte opened the menu and froze, eyes wide.

Allen went on, speaking the lines he'd rehearsed. "The chef is from Neils Kingdom, you see. So you can enjoy both local and Neils cuisine here."

This city lay near the border between the Notre Empire, where they lived now, and the Kingdom of Neils, where Charlotte was from. Naturally, there were many restaurants offering the cuisines of both territories, but this restaurant was particularly acclaimed.

As Allen explained this, Charlotte remained silent. He got a little

uneasy and scratched his chin. "Um...you've settled in well here, so I thought it might be nice for you to taste your native cuisine again. But if you feel uncomfortable, we can go to a different place right away—"

"No," Charlotte whispered, shaking her head slowly. She pointed at one item on the menu. A warm light glowed in her smiling eyes. "This tomato soup with beans and chicken... My mother used to make this for me often. It's been such a long time... I'd like to taste it again."

"Of course," Allen answered with a heartfelt nod. When the waiter returned, he ordered the soup along with some other dishes, and then he smiled at Charlotte again. "Let's talk a little until the food comes. About the future."

"Yes..." She nodded awkwardly.

"So. You have two choices right now." He held up two fingers. "First, you can forget everything in your past, and live a quiet life."

"Forget...everything?" Charlotte pondered the suggestion.

"Indeed." Allen gave a firm nod. "You saw today how you can walk freely around town without wearing a disguise. There's still a bounty on you, but...if, by chance, a bounty hunter comes along, I'll dispose of them at any cost."

Just like he was about to do right now. *Is it the boss's turn now?* Allen casually glanced around the dining hall, while Charlotte was deep in thought.

Five men sat at a table a little way off. They were all therianthropes, and at first glance, they seemed to be enjoying their food, engaged in cheerful conversation. There was no trace of animosity in the air. But from the way they carried themselves, Allen was certain they were fighters who'd lived through numerous battles.

The pack that had attacked them in the enchanted objects shop weren't so strong, even accounting for the fact that they had been up against Allen and the formidable duo, Roo and Gosetsu. He conjectured that those assailants had been the first unit of the army. And the group of five sitting in the restaurant with him must have been the much more powerful unit.

So Allen covertly tapped on the table three times, giving Gosetsu and Roo the signal they'd agreed upon. In that instant, something hurtled past Allen in a white blur.

"Grrr! Gawr gawr!" A fluffy white puppy barked wildly at the therianthropes, jumping up and down at their feet.

"Whoa...what the hell? Where'd this pup come from?" It should have been easy for them to get rid of a dog, but they probably didn't want to do anything to attract attention. The men were at a loss. They seemed to be racking their brains for the best way to deal with it.

"Oh my, do forgive us," said a sultry voice.

"Huh?"

A gorgeous woman in a black dress was calling to them from nearby. Holding her hand up to her voluptuous auburn hair, she flashed an apologetic yet flirty smile at them. "She's my little one. She can never sit still, I don't know what to do with her... I'm so sorry to trouble you."

"Huh? Ah, well, it's no bother...right, guys?"

"Uh, yeah. Maybe the pup thought she's one of us."

The men were obviously mesmerized by the beautiful lady. Apparently, her charms worked on a variety of species, not just humans. Her smile broadened even more as she surveyed the enchanted beast-men.

"Tee hee... I am glad to hear it. Well then, good night."

"Wha—?!"

All of the men slumped down at once, unconscious. The woman had karate chopped every single one of them at a blinding speed. At the same time, she'd put up a barrier around them, so no one else in the room noticed the incident.

The beauty, Gosetsu, then effortlessly threw the unconscious beast-men over her shoulder and strode out of the restaurant in triumph, puppy Roo trailing after her. The thumbs up she gave as she crossed the threshold took the glory.

Note to self...never get on their bad side, Allen resolved, watching the pair depart. In any case, they seemed to have cleared the room of the enemy. Relieved, he continued with the conversation.

"And here's the other option," he said. Instead of forgetting everything in her past and living a quiet life, there was another possible future for Charlotte. "Find closure for everything. That's the long and the short of it."

Charlotte caught her breath a little, and her face stiffened.

"The first goal would be to restore your honor. We'd expose the false accusations leveled against you, and prove your innocence."

Although rumors about her scandal were dying down, Charlotte's name would forever be sullied if they didn't fight back. She was still young; she had a long life ahead of her. It was vital to clear her name so that she wouldn't have to live under the dark shadow of her fabricated crimes. That was Allen's thinking, at least.

However, Charlotte's face remained tense. She was staring at her hands, which she held tightly together on her lap, without even blinking.

Well, it's no surprise that she reacts this way... It would mean confronting her deepest fears, Allen thought, watching her.

In order to clear her name, she would need to stand up against the Evans family, who had abused Charlotte over many years. And there was the second prince of Neils Kingdom, who had framed her for

crimes she'd never committed. It wouldn't be enough for Allen and Gosetsu to punish them—if Charlotte herself didn't overcome them, it would be meaningless.

Allen didn't want to push her too hard. "But then again," he said with a shrug, trying to make light of it, "it takes time and effort to scheme up a revenge. If you don't feel up for it, we don't have to—"

"I..." Charlotte interrupted, finally opening her mouth. When she lifted her face slowly, she still looked tense, but he could see that something had changed inside her. "Until now...I've been running away. It wouldn't be true to say I've endured things. I've always been running away, too scared to fight back." She spoke calmly, but her voice quivered. Still, she looked straight into Allen's eyes. A warm, strong light—like the magic light she had created with her wand—glowed in her eyes. "I want to change," she said. "So I won't run away anymore. Even if it's scary, and painful, and my heart feels like it might burst...I don't want to run away ever again."

"Then...?"

She took a deep breath, then said, "Yes. I'd like to stand up against them."

For a few moments, Allen was speechless. *I knew she'd gotten more confident...but this is even more than I imagined.*

"And...most of all, I want to see my little sister again," she burst out. It was as if all the words pent up inside her were gushing out now.

"Ah, your half-sister. What was her name again?"

Charlotte smiled sadly. "Natalia. Though I was forced to call her Lady Natalia at home." Natalia—her little sister who had been the only one on her side. Though she'd mentioned her a few times, this was the first time Charlotte had said she wanted to see her again. "Since I got into trouble...and had to flee from my country, I think she must be having a hard time because of me. So I want to prove my innocence to her...and apologize to her, face-to-face. And, if possible...I'd love to be with her like normal sisters... That's been...my dream for a long time..." Her voice became high-pitched. Expressing the thoughts she'd been holding back for such a long time seemed to overwhelm her. Big teardrops fell from her eyes.

"Course you can be together like sisters," Allen said, gently brushing away her tears. He held her hands firmly. "I'll help you. So don't worry about anything. Everything will be all right."

"Allen..." Her face softened into a smile, and her eyes brimmed with tears again, but then her expression changed with a sudden thought and she frowned anxiously. "U-Um, I'm so happy you want to help me, but...please don't overdo it?"

"Hm...we'll need to find a compromise somewhere. First of all,

how far can I step over the law?"

"That's not even a question! You shouldn't do anything bad! You'd be a bad boy!" Charlotte chided him, tears disappearing from her eyes. Now she sounded like a strict teacher telling off a mischievous student.

Hm, perhaps she'll get so strong someday she'll keep me under her thumb. He wistfully imagined their bright future together, thinking that would be fun in its own way. "For now, I'm glad I got to hear what you want. Let's not rush into it. We can take it slow."

"Y-Yes. I'm afraid it'll cause you much trouble..."

"What are you saying? I'm your...ahem." Allen mumbled. After a little pause, he steeled himself and said it out loud. "I'm your...lover, after all. You can give me as much trouble as you like."

Charlotte blushed. "Y-Yes..." she murmured faintly.

They both grew quiet with embarrassment. The sound of people talking and laughing, and cutlery clinking on plates felt loud to them. Yet the silence between them wasn't awkward.

Allen gazed at Charlotte, who was bright red and looking down at the table, and let out an emotional sigh. *Ah, bliss...these little moments together.* As he was basking in this fresh, sweet sensation, a thought struck him.

"By the way, there's something I want to ask you. Is now a good time?" he asked.

"Oh? Of course, if it's anything I can answer..."

"Well, it's just a small question." Allen scratched his head and glanced away, finally simply asking, "So, when did you realize you like me?"

Charlotte blinked and froze. "Um...?"

"You see," Allen pressed on, "I realized how I felt about you around the time Dorothea popped up."

Dorothea was the dark elf who had been living underground in Allen's garden. She had forced them to act out a scene pretending to be lovers, and that was when Allen had finally become undeniably aware of his own love.

"But...I think I was in love with you already before that," he said. "So I wondered, what about you?"

Was it when Allen had confessed to her? Or did it happen sometime long before that? It wouldn't change anything to find out now, but he just had to know. And now that they were sitting by themselves, it was the perfect opportunity to ask her.

"So? When was it? Hmm?" Allen coaxed her, grinning.

"Oh, umm, well..." Charlotte was clearly flustered. But perhaps because she knew how persistent he could be, she sighed after a while and opened her mouth. "Um, well...I think...it was that night..."

“That night?”

“You know, when we looked at the stars together?”

“Ah, I remember.”

One night, about a month after they’d met, Charlotte had had a nightmare and couldn’t get back to sleep. Allen had invited her out to the garden to lift her spirits.

“That night, you told me, ‘I’ll always come to rescue you.’ Do you remember?”

“I guess I did say that...” In retrospect, it was such a brazen thing to say. He felt a little awkward at the memory, but she smiled gently like a blossoming flower.

“That made me truly...happy. I could tell you weren’t just saying that to comfort me—you really meant it.” Her cheeks turned pink, and she looked down at her knees. “And since then...I found myself looking at you more often, and my heart would start racing when we were together. So I thought, I must be in love.”

“Well then, you realized it much earlier than I did. You could’ve told me,” Allen chuckled.

“H-How could I?!” She looked up, startled. But the next moment she shrank down. “I worried about a lot of things, you know...like whether it wouldn’t be a nuisance if a wanted person like me were to fall in love with you...”

“Not at all. Did you think I was the type to get hung up on a thing like that?”

“Of course not...” She smiled faintly and looked up. “I won’t run away anymore. Not from my past, not from my feelings.”

“Good good, that’s the way to go. That’s my girl, Charlotte,” he said fondly with a nod. Apparently, they’d both been worrying over different things at the same time.

Feeling less nervous now, she tilted her head and said, “So, um...I’d like to ask you something too. Can I?”

“Oh yes, anything you like.”

“I was wondering...how many people have you dated before?”

“Huh?” Allen froze, wide-eyed, at the completely unexpected question. No one had ever asked him that before. He pressed a finger between his eyebrows and muttered, “Uh...did I hear you correctly? Did you just ask me about my dating experience?”

“Y-Yes.” Charlotte nodded eagerly, her expression slightly stiff. “You’re good-looking and kind, Allen...so I’m sure you’re popular with girls, aren’t you? I want to do some research so I can be better than your past girlfriends!”

“I have no idea which ‘Allen’ you’re talking about...”

“Oh?” She looked back at him quizzically.

“A big fat zero,” he said, flapping his hand. “You’re my first and

only girlfriend.”

“Oh, r-really...? But there were girls at the School of Magic, weren’t there?”

“Of course, there were female teachers and students, but I wasn’t close with any of them. After all, I only had eyes for magic.”

“So...I really am your...first lover...?”

“That’s right.”

“I-I see...” She giggled with a smile.

“You look rather happy about that.” Allen thought about how he would feel if Charlotte had had a boyfriend in the past. Of course, that prince, her awful ex-fiancé, didn’t count. When Allen tried to imagine a hypothetical lover, he felt a vein pop out in his temple. “Ah, no good...I want to kill him,” he mumbled to himself.

“Did you say something?”

“Ha ha ha, it’s nothing. Forget it. And I suppose...I’m your first too?”

“O-Of course. I’d barely talked to any man before I came here.”

“Great! Glad to hear it!” He did a little fist pump under the table.

“Hmm...” Charlotte said thoughtfully, “but I was so sure you’d be popular with women, Allen. Is it really true that there wasn’t anything with anyone?”

“You think too much of me. Who, other than you, would have such peculiar taste in men?”

“If you say so...”

“I do say so,” Allen said, shrugging. “I’ve hardly had any interactions with women...at most, they’d push some handmade lunches and sweets on me, or volunteer to clean up my lab out of the blue—that’s about it.”

Charlotte’s smile twitched. “Is that right?”

Oblivious to her reaction, Allen went on reminiscing about his teaching days. “Well, they’d just turn up with gifts saying they cooked too much or something like that. And they came in droves too, pushing their food on me—maybe because I wasn’t too picky, and I could eat anything... Come to think of it, I got letters too, once in a while. Just silly notes like ‘I can’t take my eyes off of you,’ or ‘I love the sound of your voice when you teach.’” He also remembered that it was always the female students who came to ask him questions after class. Not only that, but he would be surrounded by girls after school at the library, on the training grounds, wherever he went. “All the girls at that school were so eager to learn...”

“Allen?”

“Hm? What is it—?!” Allen caught his breath when he saw the expression on Charlotte’s face. She was smiling broadly, but it wasn’t her usual carefree, winsome smile. It was a tense smile radiating a

formidable air.

With the rigid smile plastered across her face, she calmly asked, "Could you tell me, in detail, what kind of dishes and sweets your female students gave you? I'll practice cooking them as well."

"Huh? Uh, but they were just ordinary sandwiches and cupcakes and things, nothing special—"

"It doesn't matter. Please tell me all about it anyway. Do you promise?"

"Uh, okay..." Allen could only acquiesce timidly when he heard the finality in her tone.

"I won't let them win! Whatever kind of dish it is, I'll master them all!" she exclaimed passionately.

Bewildered, Allen just managed to say, "Go for it...?" in a somewhat encouraging but confused tone.

Though he was utterly unaware of it, Allen was incredibly attractive to women. He had a fairly appealing face; he was a prodigy, touted as the most gifted in known history; and on top of that, he was a member of the Crawfords, one of the most highly distinguished families in the country. With all these elements going for him, some eccentricity in his character could be overlooked. Countless women had approached him, hoping for an advantageous match.

The world of romance, however, was as far as possible from Allen's mind back then. He hadn't noticed any of the signs, and even now, he was clueless. *Well, whatever the cause...it's a good thing Charlotte is so motivated.* From beast taming to magic, and now cooking. Her world was expanding more and more each passing day.

Deeply moved by this thought, Allen raised a glass to his lips. "You really have gotten so much stronger—bfft?!" He spewed out the ale in shock.

"Wh-What's wrong, Allen?" Charlotte asked, round-eyed.

But Allen was too startled to cover anything up. He had just seen a therianthrope, half-black leopard, half-human, stroll into the restaurant. It was unmistakable—he was the leader of the pack of bounty hunters who were after Charlotte. *So the boss himself shows his face! Is he going to attack here?!*

He'd never expected Ricardo to approach them by himself in broad daylight, where there were so many people around. He immediately went into full-guard mode, ready to hurl a spell at him at any moment.

But Charlotte glanced back and noticed the bounty hunter. To Allen's bafflement, she smiled at the beast-man. "Hello, Ricardo!"

"Ah, hello there, young lady." Ricardo grinned back and bowed to her.

"Huh?" Allen gaped at them, half-rising from his seat.

Charlotte and Ricardo were all smiles. There was no hint of tension between them. Not a trace of hostility could be felt from Ricardo either, and his gentle smile was genuine. They simply greeted each other like two acquaintances who had run into each other by chance.

What in the world...is going on? Allen wasn't even thinking about attacking anymore. Blinking in confusion, he said, "H-Hey, Charlotte. Are you, uh...acquainted with this gentleman?"

"Hmph...'acquainted,' you say?" Ricardo squinted at Allen and gave him a thin smile. There was more than a touch of disgust in his expression. "I believe you and I have met before as well."

"Oh, do you know Allen too?" Charlotte asked.

"What?! U-Uh, I have no idea what you're talking about..." Allen desperately traced back his memory. But a therianthrope named Ricardo? He didn't remember ever meeting him anywhere, let alone this city.

"I met Ricardo when I came to the city by myself for the first time," Charlotte said cheerfully. "After you gave me my first wage, do you remember?"

"Hm...? Oh, yes. That time."

Not so long ago, Charlotte had gone out to the city to buy gifts for friends with the first pay she had ever received from Allen. Allen had secretly trailed her to protect her behind the scenes. Indeed, he had whirled around in a flurry of fierce activity that day. When Charlotte had lost her way, he had circled around ahead of her to beat up the thugs hanging around their bases. He'd crushed one band of thugs after another, doing his very best to arrange a comfortable environment for Charlotte to walk through.

"I'm not sure why, but I came across so many people who were hurt and lying on the ground that day...so I was going around giving out the potions that you gave me, Allen. That's how I met Ricardo."

"Ah...I see..." Allen murmured, his hand pressed against his head.

"I'm pleased you remember." Ricardo shrugged, stone-faced.

Now that she mentioned it, perhaps Allen did vaguely recall a furry, dark figure among the hordes of thugs he'd knocked out that day...

"I can't thank the young lady enough," Ricardo said, turning to Charlotte. "I was suddenly attacked by a brutal hoodlum that day, and I sorely needed your help."

"So that's what happened..." Charlotte knitted her brows anxiously. "Who knew such a scary person would be in this city?"

"Ha ha ha..." Cold sweat streamed down Allen's back. What would she think if she found out that "hoodlum" had been Allen himself? *But wait...he really does seem to have no ill will toward Charlotte.* Ricardo

certainly wasn't putting on an act, and there was no sign of him lying about anything; he was truly grateful to Charlotte. But that left a big mystery.

As Allen stared intently at him, Ricardo smiled and said, "I'd like to speak with you later. Will you...grant me a few moments after dinner?"

"Fine," Allen replied flatly, dismissing Ricardo as their food arrived.

Everything they had for dinner was delicious, and the pair took their time enjoying the meal. Charlotte was especially thrilled to taste the flavors of her native land, making Allen particularly pleased with himself for bringing her. By the time they'd finished, the sun had long since dipped below the horizon.

And so, at least on the surface, their very first date came to a close in peace and quiet.



Later that night, Allen headed to a bar just down the street from the restaurant. Ricardo was already waiting for him at the counter, and Allen sat down next to him. When their drinks came, Ricardo began to talk slowly.

"I've been undercover in this town for a long time now. My target...I don't need to spell it out for you, do I?"

"Charlotte, you mean."

"Precisely." Ricardo gave a heavy nod and pulled out a wanted poster from his breast pocket. Of course, it was Charlotte's.

He began to tell Allen about his initial scheme. He'd gotten wind of the rumor that Charlotte was last seen near this town, and after a long, persistent investigation, he had discovered a young girl who seemed to match the description well enough. However, the day she had gone to the city by herself, and Allen had beaten up countless thugs all around—the day she ran into Ricardo—derailed his plans completely.

"That day, when the young lady extended a hand to me, I realized something." Ricardo curled his lips sardonically, tilting his glass at a slight angle. "That she's not an opponent I can match...nor one I should hunt down."

"Uh, hang on." Allen stopped Ricardo from tying up his feel-good story with a bow. "If that's the case, then why'd you attack us like that today?! It was quite a handful!"

"That's entirely my fault," Ricardo sighed heavily and shook his head. "I gathered all my followers and told them I was calling off this hunt. But they didn't listen to me. Against my orders, they started looking into Miss Charlotte, and..." He paused for a moment, and

buried his head in his hands. “And they... Before I knew it, they’d formed their own Miss Charlotte fan club. They weren’t hunting her down anymore—far from it. They were watching over her from a distance.”

“Ah...I get it now.” With a weary frown, he glanced behind his back.

A large group of therianthropes had gathered in the big bar. Needless to say, they were all the assailants that Allen, Roo, and Gosetsu had knocked out that day. All of them were clad in black, with bruises and bumps all over their body. But every single one of them was beaming radiantly.

Fully surrounded by the smiling men, was Charlotte. They were exclaiming in turn:

“Hello there! It’s an honor to finally meet you!”

“Thank you for helping our boss!”

“Oh, would you fancy some juice? We have sweets too.”

“Y-Yes please. Thank you very much.”

The beast-men bowed down to her respectfully, proffering juice and sweets, and fussing over her enthusiastically. They definitely didn’t look like thugs who were about to capture a pitiful girl.

“So basically,” Allen murmured, “you’re telling me that the reason they attacked us today is—”

“Because you stole Miss Charlotte from them, and they were wild with jealousy,” Ricardo said, finishing Allen’s sentence.

“*Why is it always weirdos that like Mommy...?*” Roo grumbled, throwing an icy look at Allen.

“*One can only say that she was born under such a star,*” Gosetsu replied absentmindedly. She was back to her Infernal Capybara self, eagerly munching on some fruits. She was completely ignoring the fact that she herself had also gone on a rampage in Charlotte’s name just the other day—as thick-headed as one would expect her to be.

Ricardo turned to Allen again and bowed deeply. “Even I couldn’t rein them in, so I could only stand back and watch. I apologize for the trouble.”

“Uh, sure...it doesn’t really matter anymore...” Allen slumped his shoulders. He felt exhausted. He’d thought it was a large mob of villains coming to attack Charlotte, but it turned out that the hostility he’d sensed in the air was directed entirely at himself. Talk about worrying over nothing.

Well, in any case...it’s all good as long as Charlotte is safe, Allen thought, looking behind him again. The beast-men around her were pointing at Allen and whispering to Charlotte.

“So, um...how are things with that wizard?” they asked.

“Oh, with Allen?”

“Yes. He hasn’t done anything...weird to you?”

“Fellas like him are bound to be dirty underneath...”

“D-Dirty...?” Charlotte tilted her head in puzzlement. Allen was half-rising to shut them up with a spell, but before he got around to it, she said with a shy smile, “Umm, I’m not sure what you mean...but Allen is a *very* good person.”

Allen’s annoyance was soothed by her words, and the beast-men seemed convinced as well. “If you say so...” they sighed, nodding along. Some of them were even shedding bitter tears.

Ricardo shrugged at the scene. “It seems she has quite a singular talent. There’s something about her that wins people over, somehow... I know it’s not my place to say, but please, look after her.”

“Of course. I’m well aware of her...charm.” Allen lifted his glass too and looked down.

Allen thought over the incident with the pack of Fenrirs, and what happened with Gosetsu. And now, these bounty hunters. There was no denying that Charlotte was a sweet-natured girl, but even so, it was bizarre that she would be so adored by an indefinite number of people and creatures.

This was one of the many mysteries to solve surrounding her life. *I wonder if it’s actually something in her blood...?* Allen downed the rest of his drink and smiled wryly. “Anyhow, I’m relieved for now. I suppose no one else in this town would be foolish enough to target Charlotte?”

“Hm...” Ricardo suddenly scowled.

“Hey, what’s that supposed to mean?” Allen grew serious at once.

Ricardo averted his eyes and began to gulp down his drink as though he wanted to drown away the truth. “Well, to be honest with you...if the problem was just my followers, I could’ve stopped them by myself. But, um...*that* was a few too many for me to do anything about...”

“Too...many...?” Just as he spoke, Allen noticed something peculiar. The street outside the bar was getting rather noisy. He didn’t feel like going to check, but he dragged himself across the room and opened the door. Gathered outside was a massive army that almost filled up the entire street.

Every one of them was armed, and their eyes were bloodshot with burning hatred. They were probably all the adventurers that, like Ricardo, Allen had beaten to a pulp, then Charlotte had lent a helping hand to. Some of the faces were familiar: Wogel of the Marionettes, Ralph of the Wolf Studs, Dominic of the Golden Epitaph, and so on. As soon as they saw Allen in the doorway, they all started howling like a furious pack of beasts.

“You villain, you Dark Overlord! Taking our idol for yourself!”

“I can’t congratulate you until I throw you a punch!”

“If you make her cry, you won’t come out of it alive!!!”

Their boos and hisses were overflowing with envy. Allen felt exhausted just listening to them.

Ricardo walked up to him from behind and added, “You see. Her fan club isn’t just my followers. They’re everywhere in the city.”

“The way she attracts all these people...surely she has the makings of a monarch?” Allen leaned his head in his hands. At this rate, she might be able to conquer the world fairly easily.

Then Charlotte came to pop her head out over Allen’s shoulder. “Wow, what a big crowd. What’s everyone doing here?”

“Ah, well. They all have something to say to me. Can you wait for me inside with Roo and the rest? Actually, feel free to go home ahead of me.”

“Oh...okay?” Charlotte looked confused, but she didn’t argue.

“Mommy, just ignore those idiots and come pet meeee. I worked hard today.” Roo tugged on Charlotte’s sleeve and led her back inside.

Allen watched them go back in with a smile, then surrounded the bar with a soundproof barrier like the one he’d used in the enchanted objects shop. This time, it encircled the entire bar. No amount of commotion outside would leak indoors.

“Hmph, I see how it is. In that case...fine.” Allen whirled around with a thin smile, his robe waving in the air. Then he declared at the top of his voice: “Anyone who has something to say about my relationship with Charlotte, come forward now! I’ll deal with the lot of you!”

“Rahhhhhhh!!!”

With that, a long and utterly pointless battle began.



“You’re the last one! Take that!” Allen shouted.

“Aieeeee!”

An electric shot struck the last one standing, and he keeled over on the ground. The street regained its peace at last. The rabble of challengers were scattered all over the broad street. The night sky was beginning to pale, and Allen assumed that Charlotte and the others, whom he’d ushered out of the bar from the back door and instructed to go home without him, had been fast asleep for a long time.

“F-Finally...” Allen flumped down on the spot.

This time, it wasn’t just the sheer numbers of the army that had been so problematic. It was that every one of them was so excessively tenacious. Since that was proof of how much they adored Charlotte, Allen had taken care to give each of them a thorough beating. No wonder it had taken so many hours.

He felt fatigue in every inch of his body, and a sigh escaped him.

“Crap... Who knew being in a relationship was so much work?” He had a vague feeling that he would be met with similar obstacles in the future too. He almost felt sickened, but he shook his head. “But I’ve promised myself that I’ll make Charlotte happy. This is nothing... This is nothing...though it does feel like I’m fighting an unnecessary battle...”

Just as he was grumbling, lying on his back, someone’s head popped into his field of vision.

“Whatcha up to, bro?”

“Hm? Oh, it’s you, Eluka.”

His younger sister smirked down at him. It was the first time in about a month that they’d seen each other. “Been a while. I heard from Jill that you finally hitched up with Charlotte! Gosh, it couldn’t have been more obvious that you liked each other, but I never imagined things would happen so soon. You’re more slick than you look, bro!” She snickered, poking at him.

“Ugh, drop it.” Allen swatted her hand aside and got to his feet. “Anyway, what about updates on your investigation?” He had asked her to carry out an important mission, after all. “Did you look into Charlotte’s family? Don’t tell me you’ve been slacking off.”

“Of *course*. I’ve done everything you can think of. I’ve got something important to tell you about that—that’s why I came to find you.” Eluka grinned mischievously and stuck out her hand to him.

What she said next was something he didn’t expect at all.

“We’re going home, bro. Back to your old pad, the Athena School of Magic. Charlotte’s li’l sis is in big trouble!”

“What?!”

Chapter 4: A Naughty Reunion Between Sisters

After climbing over mountains and crossing the sea, Allen and the gang finally arrived on the island after a long journey of three days and three nights.

“Fiiinally! Ah, glad it’s sunny today,” Eluca chirped, the first to hop off the boat.

The cloudless blue sky stretched overhead, echoing with the cries of seabirds. From the busy harbor where they’d docked, a gentle slope led up to the bustling city in the middle of the island, filled with colorful buildings. Beyond the vibrant city soared a number of giant dark buildings.

Allen let out a sigh of nostalgia at the familiar view. “Never would’ve thought I’d be back so soon...” This was the first time he’d come home in three years, since he was fired from his post as an instructor at the Athena School of Magic.

Filled with mixed feelings stirred by the island, he took Charlotte’s hand. “Here, Charlotte. Watch your step.”

“Y-Yes.” Charlotte tottered out of the boat. There was a hint of tiredness on her face that wasn’t just from the long voyage. Surveying the scenery around her, she gulped nervously. “So this is the island where your old school is... Could it be those black buildings on the top of the hill?”

“Well, you could say that. That’s the student dorm.”

“A-A dorm! It’s so big. It must be a grand school.”

“Yeah.” Allen looked all around the harbor. He glimpsed a few people in black robes similar to his own, here and there in the crowd. There were lots of teenagers in general, which didn’t surprise him.

“This whole island is the Athena School of Magic, after all.”

“Huh?!”

Athena Island was literally one big university town. Eighty percent of the island’s population consisted of students, teachers, and various staff of the School of Magic. The rest were either tourists or merchants. It was a large island—if you were to gallop all day on horseback, you still wouldn’t manage to fully circle it. The inhabited parts of the island were filled with school facilities, lodging for tourists, shopping streets, residential neighborhoods for the teachers, and so on.

When Allen explained all this to her, Charlotte tilted her head with round, quizzical eyes. "Tourists come to visit even though it's an educational island?"

"It's quite remote and has a nice climate. Guess it's ideal for those who want to get away from people, sit back and relax."

"Get away from people..." Charlotte looked around, hoping to see a familiar face in the bustle of the harbor. "I wonder if Natalia came here for that reason..."

"Hard to say..." Allen could only shake his head slowly.

Roo and Gosetsu, stepping out of the boat, cocked their heads in puzzlement.

"*Natalia—she's the li'l sis Mommy told us about on our way here, right?*" Roo asked.

"*Indeed. Though, I thought she was in Neils Kingdom?*" Gosetsu added.

"Yes, I thought so too, but..." Charlotte looked at Eluka with a stiff expression.

Eluka flashed them a big smile. "Natalia's definitely here—no doubt about it," she announced offhandedly. "She's here all by herself. No family members, no servants."

"You've shared that much with me already... Can't you elaborate any further?" Allen complained.

Eluka had told Allen and Charlotte two things: first, that Charlotte's sister Natalia was at the Athena School of Magic; second, that there was trouble brewing around her. That was all. Allen had bombarded her with questions during their journey, but she'd only given him crumbs. She'd refused to say anything more until they reached the island.

"It's a bit complicated, so I thought it'd be easier if I just show you," Eluka said with a shrug, smiling apologetically. "I'll tell you all about it when we get home."

"Tch...I saw this coming." Allen scowled. He hunched his shoulders dejectedly.

Charlotte stared into space for a moment, but she soon gasped as Eluka's meaning clicked. "By 'home,' do you mean...your parents' home where you and Allen grew up?!"

"Yup. Papa and Mama are waiting for us," Eluka said casually.

"Ahh, I-I have to introduce myself to them! I'll brace myself!"

"No worries, you'll be just fine. Actually, I have a feeling bro's the one who's gonna make it weird."

Charlotte looked surprised. "Oh, how come?"

"Well, it's a long story." Eluka shrugged. "You know bro got fired from the school three years ago, right?"

"Y-Yes. That's when he started off on his own, wasn't it?"

“Yeah. But the truth is...after he got fired, he had a huge fight with Papa and stormed off.”

“A huge fight?!” Charlotte exclaimed.

“Let it rest, Eluka...” Allen frowned wearily. If he was honest, it was an incident he’d rather forget.

“H-How did it happen?” Charlotte asked anxiously, looking to Allen. “Was it because they made you quit teaching...?”

“Nothing that serious, don’t worry,” Eluka replied. “Honestly, it was like ninety percent Papa’s fault.”

“You mean a hundred. I didn’t do anything wrong,” Allen objected.

“Really...?” Charlotte wondered, round-eyed.

“Our Papa is a pretty strong wizard too,” Eluka went on with a wry smile. “So you can imagine how awful it was when he and Allen clashed with each other. They were at it for three whole days. People still talk about it at the school.”

“Three whole days...that’s intense.”

“Yeah. Want me to show you the other side of the island later? You can see the cliff where they fought—it’s still gouged out.”

“No one fixed it?!” Allen asked.

“Duh. It’s kinda like a little tourist spot now.”

“The more I hear about it, the more incredible it sounds...” Charlotte sighed thoughtfully.

During their three-day fight, both Allen and his adoptive father had refused to back down. But in the end, Allen had more stamina and won the duel. As soon as it was settled, he’d jumped onto a boat and left the island.

When Allen summed up the story, Gosetsu narrowed her eyes and let out an amused murmur. *“Hmm... So you are willing to let bygones be bygones, and bow down before your kin for the sake of your beloved woman... Ah, quite a dramatic tale it is.”*

“Don’t get ahead of yourself,” Allen retorted. “Even after all that, Uncle and I are still on friendly terms. We’ve been exchanging letters, and besides, quarrels like that used to happen all the time when I was at home.”

“Sounds like humans aren’t that different from us. I have fights with my siblings too!” Roo chortled, a purr in her throat.

On the face of it, the story sounded bad—abandoning home after a big fight—but Allen barely had any hard feelings left about that part. There was only one reason he’d stayed away since then. *I really hope they won’t dig up that topic again...* He wouldn’t have set foot on this island for another ten years at least if it hadn’t been for Charlotte. But if it was to help Charlotte, he was ready to face his parents again.

Meanwhile, Eluka was regarding Gosetsu and Roo with a

thoughtful gaze, stroking her chin. “I was only gone for a little while, but things have gotten a lot livelier around you, bro. A Fenrir and an Infernal Capybara, huh. Mama’s gonna be super excited.”

“*Oho, is your venerable mother well-acquainted with magical beasts?*” Gosetsu asked.



“Uh-huh. She’s a top researcher in the Study of Magical Beasts. It’s my first time seeing a little Fenrir up close, so I’m psyched too. You’re so fluffy and chunky!” Eluka said, cuddling Roo.

“*Heh heh, I know. Feel free to pet me more.*” Roo couldn’t help grinning.

Eluka was getting along well with Gosetsu and Roo. Like Allen, her mother had trained her on the language of magical beasts, so she had no trouble chatting with them.

Charlotte gazed at them for a while. “But...I’m a little jealous,” she murmured in a small voice.

“Hm? About what?” Allen asked.

“Um, well...” she looked down at her toes and went quiet. After a few moments, she smiled a little sadly and said, “I’ve never had a quarrel with family in my life...so I wish I had someone like that.”

When she was little, she of course couldn’t bring herself to say anything selfish to her mother, who worked herself to the bone. And after her mother’s death, when she was taken to live with the Evans, she had no one to whom she could express her true feelings. So she’d never had the chance to quarrel with anyone. The more Charlotte spoke, recounting her past in a faltering voice, the darker her expression grew.

Allen listened to her till the end. Eventually, he grinned brightly. “Well then, you can change that in the future.”

“Oh?”

He took her hand and peered into her face. “You’re going to see your sister Natalia again, aren’t you?”

A light came into her eyes as soon as she heard her sister’s name. The shadow that had fallen on her face lifted in an instant.

Allen didn’t miss the spark. *She’ll be all right*, he thought. He squeezed her hand and went on, “You can meet your sister and get close to her again, so close you’ll have fights. Then you can have all the quarrels you ever dreamed of.”

“But...do you think we can be close?” Charlotte looked worried. “I fled from that country... I’m a wanted villain. Natalia must have had her share of trouble because of me.”

“Those were false charges, not your fault. I’m sure she’ll understand.” Allen was confident. Natalia was the only one in the Evans family who’d cared for Charlotte. Surely she’d be sympathetic once she heard the whole story. He cleared his throat and tried to say something suave. “Not to worry, I’ll lend a hand too. For you, I would do—gah?!”

Gosetsu and Roo pounced on top of him from behind and cut off his line.

"We, too, are at your service," Gosetsu declared.

"I dunno what's happening, but me three!" Roo barked.

Charlotte was almost moved to tears by the trio's support. "Thank you so much, everyone."

"Yeah, don't get too hung up on it, Charlotte. I'm on your side too, and so are Papa and Mama," Eluka encouraged Charlotte with a grin, putting her hand on Charlotte's shoulder.

In the midst of the heartwarming scene, Allen was still sprawled on the ground, face down. "Ugh...get off already, you two! You're crushing me!"

"My my, what manners. Has no one taught you that you should never refer to a lady's weight?" Gosetsu tutted at Allen.

"Wahey! You're pretty comfy to sit on, Allen," Roo commented. They didn't budge at all.

"Um, maybe you can let him go..." Charlotte said.

Eluka stroked her chin again, watching the scene. "Bro has changed a lot, but you've gotten a lot more cheerful too, Charlotte. At this rate, you'll be friends with Natalia in no time... Oh, what's that?" She paused, staring at one corner of the wharf.

Allen followed her gaze. A crowd had gathered around two people grappling with each other: a young man and a young merman.

"What's your problem?! You want a piece of me?!"

"You better watch your mouth!!!"

Each of them were backed by a handful of humans and merpeople who appeared to be their friends. Apparently, the two had gotten into a fight over some trivial problem. Sparks were flying between them.

The others in the crowd only looked on from a distance. No one stepped forward to mediate. Since the Athena School of Magic was a renowned institution across the world, it attracted diverse species. Everyone was used to seeing such small quarrels.

"Speaking of fighting..." Allen remarked.

"I-I have a feeling that kind of quarrel is bad. Shouldn't we stop them?"

"Hmm. Maybe." Allen considered it, still under the beasts. To be honest, he had zero interest in other people's problems. But if it might make Charlotte sad, that was another story. He considered it his job to resolve any issues quickly and efficiently to make her at ease.

He was about to fling the pair of beasts off his back and get up when he noticed a familiar head of silver hair among the crowd.

"Hm...?" *That changes things completely.* He gave up on getting out from under the beasts and propped his head on his hand. "On second thought, better leave them alone. They're not worth the trouble," he grumbled.

Eluka nodded with a half smile. "Thought so." She seemed to have

noticed the silver hair too.

Charlotte was the only one in the dark. “A-Are you sure it’s okay? What if someone gets hurt?” she said anxiously, her face pale.

“It’ll be fine,” Allen sighed. “They’ll be quelled in no time.”

“Huh?” Charlotte was wide-eyed.

The bickering was quickly flaring up. The air was tense, and the two groups seemed ready to pounce on each other at any minute. None of them noticed the man approaching.

“Excuse me, youngsters.”

“Huh? What do you want—?!”

The man plopped his hands on the shoulders of the two youths leading the fight. In that instant, a raging gust of freezing wind whipped through the harbor. There was a stir among the onlookers. When the chill in the air subsided, they saw numerous pillars of ice towering in front of them, one for each youth involved in the squabble. The troublemakers were trapped in the ice, their faces frozen in astonishment. None of them moved an inch.

The man had cast a large-scale spell without uttering any incantation. It was a graceful, efficient maneuver.

“How disappointing... I came all this way to see you, and what do I find?” The man with long silver hair smiled dryly. He looked to be about the same age as Allen. His tall, slender frame was cloaked in elegant, choice garments, topped with a black overcoat featuring gold embroidery. He was the very picture of a superior wizard.

When his genial face softened into a smile, the word “gentleman” suited him exceedingly well. “Listen closely: this island isn’t just for students. We get other visitors as well,” he lectured earnestly at the pillars of ice. “As students of our school, you should exercise moderation and...ah, I forgot you can’t hear me just now. I’ll have to summon you later.” The man looked around at all the pillars and gave a light shrug.

By then, the onlookers understood. They said things like, “Well done, sir,” and “We’ll take care of the rest,” and “Wonder if there’s any space in the discipline room,” and so on. They seemed to know the drill.

Staring at the scene, Charlotte breathed a sigh of admiration. “H-He’s quite impressive... Reminds me of you, Allen.”

“Indeed. That man is a force to be reckoned with, I tell you.” Gosetsu narrowed her eyes at the man with curiosity.

The man noticed them. “Oh...?” He looked at them in surprise for a moment, then his face broke into a bright smile. He rushed over to them, raising a hand. “It’s been so long, Allen. I’m glad to see you’re well.”

“Is that all you’ve got to say at this sight?” Allen, still squashed,

glared up at the man.

Eluka snapped up her hand in greeting. "We're baaack! As you can see, I've brought bro and everyone else!"

"Thank you, Eluka. You've been a big help," the man said, all smiles. He turned to Charlotte. "And you must be Charlotte. I've heard so much about you. Pleased to make your acquaintance."

"N-Nice to meet you... Um, may I ask who you are?"

"Ah, my apologies. Where are my manners?" He smiled cordially and, placing a hand to his chest, he said, "My name is Harvey Crawford. I'm Allen and Eluka's Papa."

"Their father?!"

"Shocking, right? Papa likes to look young."

"Yeah, but in his case, it's overkill," Allen sighed, sounding fed up. Harvey had shown no sign of aging since he'd adopted Allen as a small boy. Allen had a sneaking suspicion that he was using some kind of weird magic.



And so, the group arrived at the Crawfords' house. The grand mansion stood inside an expansive garden, encircled by a tall wall. It was in a suburban area, a slight distance away from the center of the island, with no other houses in the immediate vicinity. This was where Allen had grown up.

It looked like exactly the kind of residence a bourgeois would build, but its extravagance served a function. It was designed in such a way so that the family wouldn't be a nuisance to any potential neighbors.

Since everyone in the family worked on some kind of magical research, the walls of the mansion often reverberated with sounds of explosions and ominous shrieks. For someone like Allen who grew up in this environment, that was nothing. But if their house had been located in a denser residential neighborhood, there would've been no end to complaints.

Allen and the others were invited into the spacious drawing room of the mansion, fitted with a deep-pile carpet. Tired from the long journey, Roo and Gosetsu both flumped belly-up on the floor.

Allen and Charlotte sat on one of the sofas, and Harvey sat across from them, a low table in between.

"Well well. It really has been a long time, Allen," Harvey began with a gentle smile. "I'm relieved to see you seem as well as ever, but..." He paused to smile at Charlotte, and pulled out a handkerchief to dab at his eyes theatrically, though they didn't see any sign of tears there. "To think you would bring such a cute sweetheart back home. It's beyond my wildest dreams. If there ever were a championship for

social misfits, you might not come out on top, but I'm sure you'd at least be seeded... But has she really given her consent to receive your courtship, Allen? Your Papa can't help worrying that his precious son is doing something appallingly immoral."

"You talk way too much..." Allen grumbled.

"U-Um, Allen has been very kind to me. Of course, our...c-courtship is really, um, based on mutual consent too!"

"Charlotte, just ignore him. Don't make him more pleased than he already is."

"Ooh, is that a blush I see on your cheeks, Allen? What a rare sight. Today is a fine day indeed." Harvey beamed even wider.

"You better cut it out, or I'll make you." Allen glowered at him, a vein popping on his temple. Still, he reminded himself that it would be a waste of time to respond to Harvey's provocation. He heaved a great sigh and looked straight into Harvey's eyes again. "I'll get straight to the point. Is it true that Charlotte's little sister is here?"

"Oh yes, very true. Eluka, if you would."

"All righty. I'll get prepped," Eluka replied, leaving the room.

Harvey turned to Charlotte. "I've heard everything about your predicament, Charlotte. You've had such a difficult time. If you have any concerns, do feel free to let me know—I'd be happy to help in any way I can."

"Th-Thank you very much." Charlotte nodded, her face tense. She seemed nervous in front of her new acquaintance, not least because he was Allen's father. But she had another reason to be on edge. With a gulp, she asked hesitantly, "I'd like to know...why did Natalia come here? Did something happen to her?"

Harvey nodded thoughtfully. "In short, she's only here to study abroad."

"Study abroad?"

"Yes. It's quite common, you see. Children of the aristocracy whose family relations have gotten complicated are often sent here, so that they can be out of the way until the troubles blow over." Harvey gave a shrug.

It was a timeworn tale. Aristocrats often let money do the talking and went into hiding, whether in hospitals or schools or anywhere else, until rumors about whatever scandal died down. This island was half a day's journey by sea from the mainland, making it the perfect hideaway.

"Her family used some connections to ask us if she could enroll in the school. Our policy is to welcome all who knock on our doors, so we agreed. That was about three months ago."

"It's been that long? You could've let me know sooner," Allen said.

“Well, as it often happens, she was enrolled under a false identity. We only found out recently that she was actually Charlotte’s sister,” Harvey explained.

“Makes sense... The scandal made big news in this country too. No wonder they tried to disguise her.” Allen let out a small sigh.

Charlotte’s incident had thrust the Evans family into the international spotlight. And Natalia held an important position as the only legitimate daughter and heiress of the Duke. It seemed reasonable that they would try to shelter her from the public scrutiny.

“But if she’s just studying here, what was Eluka talking about? What’s the big trouble?” Allen asked.

Harvey held up his index finger. “Well. Before I go into that...there’s one thing I want to go over.” His smile was still cordial, but there was a dull glint in his eyes. “Allen. What would you say to thinking over *that* matter one more time?” he asked in a quiet voice.

“I refuse,” Allen answered bluntly.

Charlotte blinked, tilting her head. “‘That matter’? What’s this about?”

“Remember the fight between me and Uncle that we told you about earlier? ‘That matter’ is where it all started.”

Three years ago, Allen had had a major dispute with the faculty council of the school, and his career as a teacher there was over. But right after that, Harvey had suggested something unthinkable.

“Uncle’s the Headmaster here,” Allen explained to Charlotte. “He wants me to take over so he can step down from the role.”

“What?!” Charlotte cried out. She looked at Harvey with sparkling eyes of admiration. “You’re the Headmaster of such a big school...? That’s amazing!”

“Oh no, it’s nothing to boast about,” Harvey said with a smile.

“But why don’t you want to, Allen?” Charlotte asked. “It seems like a great honor...”

“Indeed. I’m of the same opinion,” Gosetsu interjected, leaning forward in her seat on the sofa. *“This Athena School of Magic has a noble history, and it’s the highest seat of learning for magic. To stand at the top of such an institution is an honorable position that would engrave your name in the annals of history. I see no reason why you should reject such an offer.”*

“It’s simple,” Allen said brusquely. “Titles come with baggage. I don’t want to be shackled by anything.”

At the Athena School of Magic, the student population numbered more than ten thousand. With the teaching staff and supporters outside the school on top of that, it was an extremely large organization. If Allen were to be the leader of such an institution, he wouldn’t be able to avoid getting fettered down by something or

other. Politics and tactful negotiations weren't his thing. So he had spurned Harvey's idea.

When Allen explained all this, Harvey's smile broadened. "Now, there's no need to rush to conclusions like that. You can build up your experience working as my secretary, and win over the other professors in the process. I'll give you my full support, and try to ward off any sparks that might fly your way."

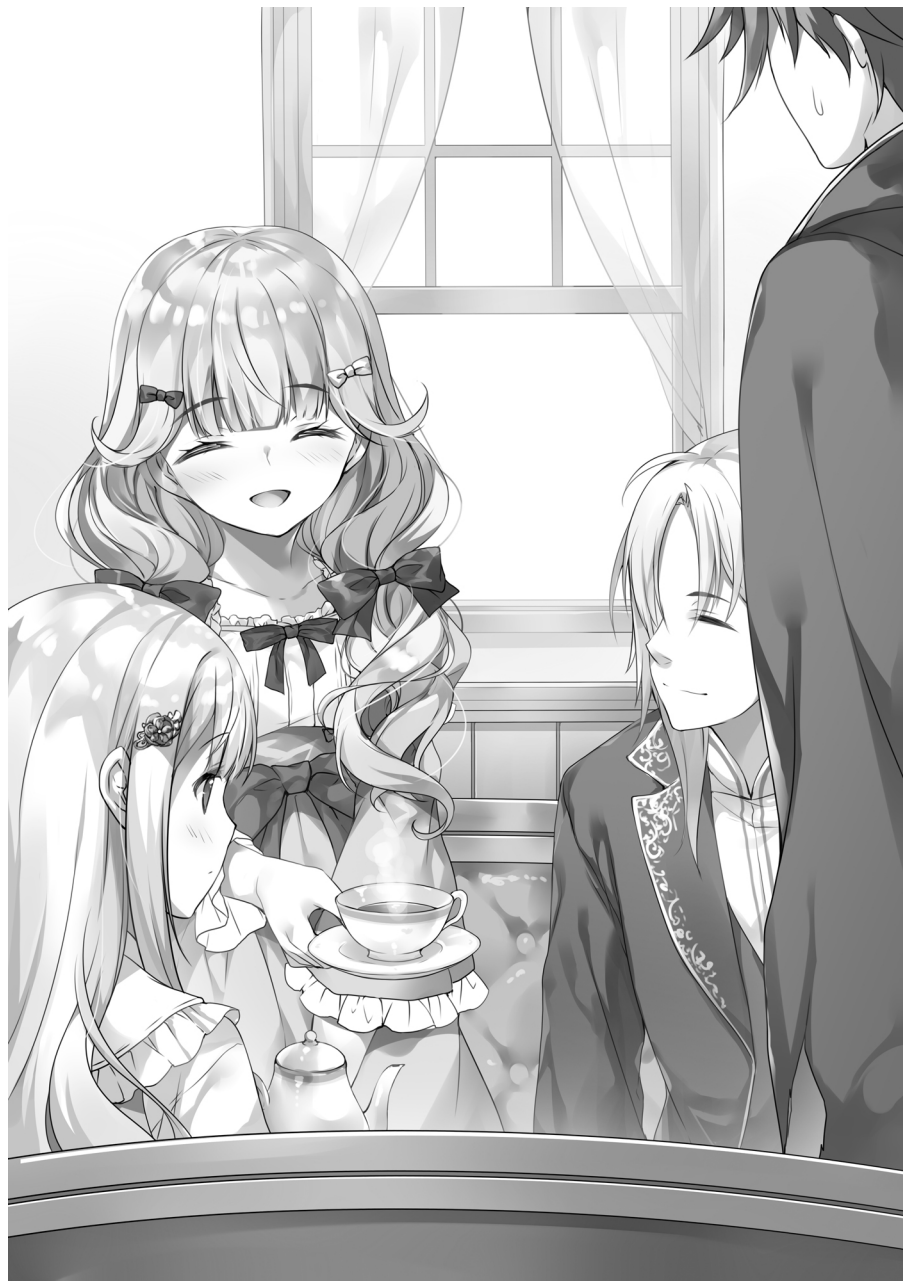
Harvey leaned forward and held out a hand to Allen. He looked straight at Allen, his eyes brimming with tender love. They were the same eyes that Allen had seen as a little boy, when Harvey had declared that he would take Allen home with him. "The only one who can take my place is you, my son. Though we're not related by blood, I'm certain of that."

"Your charade won't work on me!" Allen swatted at Harvey's outstretched hand. He rose to his feet and pointed at his father. "I know what you're really after, Uncle! The real reason you want me to take over is—"

The door to the drawing room opened.

"Hello there." With a breezy greeting, a young girl carrying a teapot and cups on a large tray entered.

The girl, about fifteen or so in appearance, gave off an airy impression like cotton candy. Ribbons adorned the light curls of her peach-pink hair, and her flowery dress was also embellished by ribbons and trimmed in lace. She brought the tray to the table and gave Charlotte a soft smile. "Oh my, you really are an adorable creature. You must be tired from the long journey. I hope you'll make yourself at home here and have a good rest."



“Th-Thank you very much?” Charlotte was clearly confused, but she gave a little bow.

Harvey looked fondly at the young girl as she swiftly prepared tea for everyone. “Thank you, dear Lizzie. Shall I help you?”

“It’s all right. We haven’t had this many guests in so long. I’m so excited! Here you are. I baked some cookies that are edible for magical beasts too, so you’re very welcome to have as many as you like.”

“*Yippee! Yes please!*” Roo wagged her tail. The young girl stroked Roo’s head and plopped down next to Harvey.

Charlotte was looking at her curiously, but her face brightened up with sudden recognition. “Are you Allen’s little sister by any chance? Nice to meet you. I’m Charlotte.”

“Oh my, his little sister? I’m flattered.”

“No, Charlotte. She’s not my sister, but my Aun—?!”

A fierce wind sliced through the air past Allen’s cheek. He cautiously turned around to look. A teaspoon was stuck in the wall right behind him. It had pierced through the surface, even though it was made of magical materials that rendered it impervious to some magic. When he slowly turned back to the young girl, she was smiling gently with her hand on her cheek.

“Oh, Allen dear. I know it’s been three years, but don’t tell me you’ve forgotten what to call me? ‘Aunt’ doesn’t sound cute at all. You don’t want to make your Mama sad, do you?”

“I’m sorry...Mother.” Allen hung his head and forced himself to say the words.

Charlotte jumped up. “You’re his *mother*?!” Roo and Gosetsu also looked up, wide-eyed, as they munched on the cookies.

The girl seemed satisfied by their reactions. “I’m Liselotte Crawford. Lovely to meet you,” she said cheerily.

“And she’s my wife.” Harvey hugged her shoulder and flashed a peace sign with a beaming smile.

Ever since Allen had met them, this pair hadn’t aged one bit. It was no wonder that some people called them “the superhuman couple” and “the walking frauds” behind their backs. In any case, this was the very reason that Harvey wanted Allen to take his place.

“Your real motive for pushing the role on me is Aun—I mean, Mother, right?” Allen demanded. “You just want to be all lovey-dovey with Mother 24/7, don’t you?! Don’t turn your big role over to me for such a stupid reason! You can’t be serious!”

“Stupid! What do you mean, ‘stupid’?!” Harvey exclaimed with a flash of anger, his smile vanishing. “Yes, being a Headmaster is an honorable job! The joys of nurturing countless students, of advancing

research in magic—those are wonderful things!” he ranted with dramatic gestures. “But...what’s all that compared to Lizzie? It means almost nothing to me! I just can’t wait to push the work on my son, hole up in some villa deep in the forest somewhere, and spend all my days flirting with my wife from morning till night!”

“You’re too honest, you know that?! It’s weird that I’m the one to say it, but seriously, what makes you think you can use your son like that?!”

“Of course, you’re my precious son. So you know, I thought it’d be nice to add a new sister or brother to the family sometime soon.”

“Stop it, that’s too real...!”

Allen and Harvey were kicking up a racket with such force that they seemed ready to pounce on each other. Three years ago, they’d gotten into a fight along the same lines, which had led to the brutal, three-day battle. This time, with Charlotte in their presence, they refrained from using magic and restricted themselves to verbal attacks.

Leaving the happy father and son to themselves, Liselotte sipped her tea with a sigh. “I’m sorry, Charlotte dear. We’re such a noisy family. I hope we haven’t shocked you?”

“N-Not at all. I wish I had such a close family!”

“Aww, you’re a dear. But you know, Charlotte, you’re already like a daughter to us.” Liselotte rose to her feet and laid a gentle hand on Charlotte’s head. “You’ve gone through a lot, haven’t you? I hope you’ll think of me as your second mother and tell me anything you like.”

“Mrs. Crawford...”

“*Me too, count me in! Mommy Lizzie’s cookies are so yummy!*” Roo chirped, snuggling up to Liselotte.

“Of course, you’re part of the family too. There’s more where those came from!” Liselotte beamed at Roo’s show of affection. Though she looked like a young girl on the outside, Liselotte was clearly a strong mother inside, having brought up Allen and Eluka.

The father and son were locked in a disgraceful quarrel, while the mother and the girls were having a heartwarming exchange. Gosetsu, observing the stark contrast, murmured thoughtfully, “*I wouldn’t have expected anything less from Allen’s family. This is like a value pack of eccentrics and oddballs.*”

“Hey, sorry about that. Papa and Mama are getting carried away,” Eluka sighed, coming back and catching on to the scene. She stood next to a large object that she’d lugged into the room, the shape of it covered in white cloth. Eluka glanced at her father and shook her head. “Come on, Papa, you’re bringing that up again? Didn’t you give it up after the big fight three years ago?”

“Well...I did, at the time...” Harvey looked away awkwardly. It was true—since that fight, Harvey had only touched on the idea lightly in his letters to Allen. In his letters, he had sounded like he was just casually hoping Allen might have changed his mind.

“So why are you so pushy about it now?” Allen asked.

“Actually...there’s been a slew of problems at the school lately.” Harvey slumped down on the sofa and let out a heavy sigh. He looked rather grim as he buried his head in his hands. The issues must have dealt him a serious blow. “These days, some of the students are engaged in a sort of fierce rivalry between cliques. And those struggles are led by the top students with considerable power... They’ve been quite a handful for the administration.”

“But turf battles aren’t new. They used to happen back when I was here too,” Allen remarked.

“Oh, those are like child’s play compared to what’s happening now. The biggest cliques have blown up to about a hundred members. Imagine armies like that clashing with each other all over the island every day. Even I’m having trouble reining them all in.”

“Well, that’s unsettling. Was that squabble at the harbor part of it?”

“Yes, likely.” Harvey nodded listlessly.

In a closed community like a school, it was impossible to keep cliques from forming. It wasn’t anything new that they would clash with each other either. But if each clique had an army of hundreds, their squabbles took on a different dimension. The Athena School of Magic was full of remarkable students. If the most powerful among them were leading the battles, they couldn’t be called small skirmishes between students anymore; they were a dangerous power struggle between gangs.

Harvey began to list various incidents from the ongoing power struggle, and they were all on a fairly large scale: a whole school building getting half-demolished, the sea splitting apart, a swarm of dragons summoned by the students filling the sky...and so on and so forth. The school was inundated by complaints from the tourists as well.

Harvey looked up at them imploringly. “Thanks to that, I’m busier than ever before, and I barely have time to make out with Lizzie anymore!” he gushed despairingly. “Can you imagine how it tortures me?! I’m sure you can, Allen! You’ve finally gotten your first girlfriend now! Oh, how I envy you—spending every waking hour with your lover, living under one roof. You can do whatever you want! I wish I could have a share of your time...”

“Do you want me to knock you out...? Uh, hang on.” Allen was about to raise his fist, but he realized something and stroked his chin

instead. "You said the school's in a bind. Does that have anything to do with...Charlotte's little sister?"

"N-Natalia?" Charlotte asked, her face changing color.

"Hm...your intuition is as sharp as ever, I see," said Harvey, letting out a big sigh again. "Allen and Charlotte, I asked Eluka to bring you to this island for this reason. I'm counting on you to resolve Natalia's issue and...save this school at the same time."

"You've upped the stakes all of a sudden..." Allen said. "You're not suggesting Charlotte's sister is involved in that power struggle, are you?"

"I'll show you what I mean," Harvey replied. "That will be quicker. Eluka?"

"Ready," Eluka said casually, slipping off the cloth from the object she'd brought in. It was a large mirror in a golden frame. But the mirror didn't reflect Allen and the others. Only something like a white haze swirled in its reflection.

"This is called the Mirror of Nostalgia, and it's an enchanted object that can reveal an elsewhere—a place that's different from where you are." Harvey snapped his fingers. The haze lifted from the mirror in an instant and showed them an outdoor scene.

Charlotte gasped. "Natalia!"

The enchanted mirror showed an airy garden. A gentle breeze swayed the trees, and countless flowers were in bloom. Though it looked like a cozy spot, there was only one figure in the scene.

A little girl sat on the edge of a fountain, swinging her feet in apparent boredom, clad in a black robe and Athena's school uniform. Her shoulder-length hair was blonde, and her sharp eyes a deep crimson. She looked exactly like the little girl that Allen had seen when he'd stepped into Charlotte's dream a while back. She must be seven now.

Seeing her sister for the first time in so long, Charlotte was rendered speechless. Silence fell over the drawing room.

"H-Hang on," Allen said abruptly. "Who are those guys?"

In the edges of the mirror, Allen could see a big pack of students entering the garden: there were Rock People, dragonoids, therianthropes, and merpeople. No humans. All of them had robust physiques and bearings that told Allen at a glance that they'd had decent training. And all of them, about thirty in total, were slowly walking toward Natalia, their heads slightly downcast. Even Allen broke out in a cold sweat at the scene.

Charlotte was deathly pale. "N-Natalia...! Will she be okay?!"

"This doesn't look good! We have to go help her!" Allen shouted.

Before they could even make a move, the mob had already surrounded Natalia. One dragonoid—a species which had the body of

a human, except for a much larger build that was covered in scales, as well as sharp talons and fangs—stepped forward and slowly stretched out his hand to the little girl.

It was clearly a tense moment.

But Harvey waved off Allen's concerns, paying them no mind. "It's all right. In the end, their boss knows when to hold back and be kind—plus, if we rush in to intervene, it might just rile them up... We should watch quietly for now."

"You can't just sit here and let things happen! Never mind, I'll go! This is around the third research block, isn't it?!"

Just as Allen was about to dash out of the room, an unbelievable scene unfolded in the mirror.

BOOOOM!!!

A deafening explosion resounded, and the dragonoid near Natalia was flung into the air. The large creature, which must've measured at least two meters, flew like he weighed nothing, falling to the ground with a painful smack. It was a rather surreal sight.

The others murmured among themselves and stepped aside to make way for an approaching figure. The one who slowly strode through the gap in the mob was Natalia herself. Her face had the ominous fury of a demon god, and she emanated a prickling aura of bloodthirsty hostility.

"Don't play games with me..." She gripped a savory stuffed bread in her hand, and raged at the top of her voice, "I thought...I ordered you to get a yakisoba bun, *not* a croquette!!!"



Once again, a hush had fallen over the drawing room, where everyone stared at the mirror, enraptured.

"Uh...?" Allen and Charlotte exchanged looks in surprise. They stared at the mirror, then looked at each other again.

These days, Allen found himself quite often in ridiculous situations, with plenty of things to shake his head at. He'd thought he was getting used to the absurdity. But *this*? This was hard to comprehend, even for him.

Of course, Charlotte was staring at the scene in the mirror too, mouth hanging open. Roo and Gosetsu were also dumbfounded.

In the mirror, they saw a commotion break out among the pack. The dragonoid staggered to his feet, then pushed his forehead against the ground in desperate supplication.

"I-I'm sorry, Boss!" he stammered. "Yakisoba buns are so popular at the school co-op...it's always sold out! So I got a croquette instead... I'm so sorry!"

But Natalia was unmoved by his groveling. "That has nothing to do with me! Can't you even be a proper flunky? I'm fed up with all of you... Is that bulky frame of yours only for show?!"

"Please Boss, cut him some slack."

"It's no use getting worked up, Boss."

"The croquette buns are pretty good too!"

The others jumped in to soothe Natalia's fury. They were all polite and obsequious. The dragonoid kept his face pressed to the ground. Natalia clearly resembled a gang lord who kept her minions on a tight leash.

"What...in the world?" Allen couldn't make sense of it. He slowly turned around to Harvey, tacitly entreating him to offer a reasonable explanation.

Harvey shook his head slowly. "About three months ago, Natalia arrived here as an international student. Since then, like any student, she has learned magic freely here. And as a result..." He paused and inhaled deeply. He grabbed Allen's shoulders and shouted urgently, "She has ramped up her power at a dizzying speed rarely seen in history, and now she's reigning over much of the school as one of the top-tier clique leaders! She's out of our control now... So I need you to deal with the issue ASAP!"

Allen finally grasped why he'd been called to the island. "Right...can I go home now?" That was all Allen could say to Harvey's desperate plea. *Isn't this just...a parent-teacher meeting for a troublemaker?* He almost wanted to take back all his worries. "How ridiculous. Don't you think so, Charlotte? Uh...Charlotte?"

"O-Oh no..." Charlotte was staring intently at the mirror, as white

as a ghost. Natalia was still spewing venom at her followers. Eventually, Charlotte sprang closer to Allen and clung to him. “What should we do, Allen?!” she cried out in a quivering voice. “Natalia...Natalia has turned into a bad girl!”

“Is ‘bad girl’ the right term...?” Allen thought she was more like a demonic drill sergeant than a bad child or a delinquent.

“Actually, she’s not such a bad girl deep down... See?” Harvey pointed at the mirror with a sigh.

The dragonoid was timidly lifting his face from the ground now. “I...I’m sorry, Boss...” he said with a sob. “I’ll put my life on the line to secure the yakisoba bun... H-Here’s the leftover change...” He pulled out a leather pouch from his pocket and presented it to Natalia, still cowering in fear.

Some coins clinked in the pouch—there seemed to be a fair amount left inside. But Natalia only humphed and made no move to take it. She looked the other way with a scoff and said bluntly, “You keep it. Consider it your reward for the errand.”

“Oh...really?!” the dragonoid’s eyes lit up. “B-But there’s thirty silver coins in here! I can’t take so much!”

“Just do what I say and keep it!” Natalia snapped. “What kind of boss can’t feed her followers properly? Do you think I don’t know that you put in extra shifts at your part-time job and send money to your family back home? It’s good of you to support your family by cutting down on your own expenses, but you should take care of yourself more.”

“B-Boss...! I’m so grateful! I’ll dedicate my life to repaying this kindness!” The dragonoid wept and bowed again.

“Hmph. This is a mere pittance. Don’t be so grateful for such a little thing.”

“Your potions do fetch a handsome price at the co-op, so I guess this is nothing for you,” he said admiringly.

“I’m happy for you, buddy,” another henchman said to the dragonoid. “Now you’ll be free from the cabbage-a-day lifestyle.”

The mob whooped it up around Natalia and the dragonoid. It was definitely a bizarre sight to behold, but it was a heartwarming scene nonetheless.

“As you can see, she has a loyal following, and the charisma to draw people to her...” Harvey remarked.

“I can see she has the same genes...” Allen murmured. Natalia had an overwhelming power to win people over and a natural gift in magic. Apparently, she was blessed with the same potential as her sister.

“Natalia...” The words got stuck in her throat, tears welling up in her eyes as she gazed at her sister in the mirror. She wiped away her

tears and gave a gentle smile. "I'm relieved... She's always been a kind girl. That kindness is still there."

"Well, I'm glad to hear you're relieved. You seem to be a rather unflappable girl," Harvey remarked.

"Maybe from putting up with bro?" Eluka cut in.

"I'm sorry our Allen is such a troublemaker, Charlotte..." Liselotte added.

"Why're you all blaming me?" Allen scowled at his family, who were all casting him icy looks. Though, as much as he wanted to, he couldn't quite deny the charges.

"Mommy's little sis is really something. So weirdos like her too!" Roo barked, impressed.

"Indeed. I do wonder if she was so distinguished back home as well?" Gosetsu mused.

"No...not at all." Charlotte shook her head, a little puzzled. "She was very quiet and calm... I don't think I've ever heard her raise her voice. She's just as kind as before, but everything else is completely different."

"I see..." Allen gazed at Natalia in the mirror, stroking his chin. For a seven-year-old, her eyes were unusually sharp. "Either she was putting on a facade back home, or she went astray more recently," he muttered. He hadn't wanted to say anything to worry Charlotte, but there was no point in postponing it.

"Well, when she arrived, she seemed to be a reserved little lady... So I think the latter is more likely," Harvey said. "At first, she came with three family servants. But she soon sent them packing... Now, she's even refusing any support from her family, and earning her own money to pay for her tuition. She really is quite a headstrong young lady."

"Sounds like she's rebelling against her family... Have you informed her parents about what's happening?" Allen asked.

"We did, but we got crickets. It seems they're in the middle of quite a controversy, so I suppose they don't have the time or energy to respond."

"Well, she's a young noble lady who must've been brought up like a princess. Now she's suddenly finding herself sent off to some remote island, her family essentially abandoning her... No wonder she's misbehaving," Allen observed.

"Do you think...it's my fault that she changed like that?" Charlotte asked Allen in a low tone, her face grim.

He nodded with a frown. "It's possible that it was one of the triggers..." He knew it wouldn't do any good to offer an empty consolation, so he didn't deny it.

Charlotte was innocent. But whether or not Natalia knew the truth

was a mystery. Even if she knew that the accusations were false, it wasn't impossible that she would still hold a grudge against Charlotte for bringing even more scandal upon the family by escaping from the country.

I want Charlotte to reunite with her...but we might have to make it slow, Allen thought. If they did anything rash, it might hurt not only Charlotte but also Natalia. "Regardless...what exactly do you want us to do, Uncle?"

"If possible, it'd be a big help if Natalia could calm down a little..." Harvey sighed, and his shoulders slumped wearily. "Her gifts are incredible. Perhaps she'll even surpass you or me. But at the moment, she's far too reckless..."

As if to prove his point, there was a stir in the mob in the mirror again.

"Boss! Take a look at this!" An avianoid rushed into the mirror frame.

Natalia took a letter from him, and her face clouded over just a bit. "Hm...it's a challenge from the magic blacksmith class."

"What?! They're experts at enchanted weapons!" one of her minions cried out.

"Rumor has it, they beat the crew from the potions class to a pulp the other day..."

"Wh-What do we do, Boss?"

"Hmph. It's obvious." Natalia crumpled the letter and tossed it aside. The letter burst into flames in the air, quickly turning into ashes. With a backdrop of ash whirling in the wind, Natalia sneered. "We'll take them on! I'll make them regret ever baring their fangs at me!"

"W-Way to go, Boss!"

"All right, Boss! We'll be right behind ya!"

"Oh wait, but don't we have the Headmaster's class?"

"That's none of our concern! We'll boycott it, as usual!" Natalia declared.

"Yeah! We don't need no cradle-robbing master!"

"That's right! Well then, one and all...follow me!" Natalia shouted.

"Rahhhh!" the mob roared in response.

Natalia marched out of the garden, her minions in tow, forming one long, triumphant procession.

Harvey made the view vanish from the mirror, and let out another dramatic sigh. "It's all well and good to get experience in actual fights...but I wish they'd be a bit more diligent showing up to class."

"I'm sorry my sister is causing so much trouble..." Charlotte murmured.

"This is literally a parent-teacher meeting about a problem

child..." Allen had experience on the student side and the teacher side of that meeting, but it was his first time being on the guardian side. It was exhausting.

"And I must add," Harvey said with a serious expression, "I'm certainly not a 'cradle robber.' Lizzie and I are the same age. We've been friends since childhood. I want to make sure everyone knows that."

"I've heard it a hundred times, and I honestly don't care," Allen said.

"Ah...listen to him, Lizzie! Our son is as cold as ever!"

"There there, poor Harvey." Lizzie patted her husband's back. She held a hand to her cheek in consternation. "But listen, Allen dear. You know the school's always had cliques, often with rivalry between them. That little girl already has a third of those cliques at her beck and call. Her power is impressive, but she's a bit chaotic."

"Well, you've got a point..." Allen said.

Though Natalia had the aura of a conqueror, she was only seven years old. Something could turn the tables at any minute. And it wasn't impossible that some villainous grown-up would deceive her and lead her down an even darker path.

"I suppose I have no choice. I'll go back to my old days again." Allen gave a nod and swished aside his robe. He turned to his mother and thumped his fist on his chest. "I dealt with lots of troublemakers when I was a teacher. Leave them to me. First off, I'll try having a chat with Natalia."

"I knew you'd come around, Allen dear," Liselotte said cheerfully.

"Good! You can return to the school and push me off my Headmaster chair—"

"That's never going to happen, so you better work hard for the rest of your life." Allen shot a withering look at his father, who was brimming with hope for his personal gain, then turned to Charlotte.

Charlotte was gazing at the blank mirror. Her profile looked tense, brooding over what she had just seen. She hadn't even noticed Roo and Gosetsu looking up at her anxiously.

"Hey, Charlotte," Allen said softly.

"Oh... Wh-What is it?"

"I'm going to talk to your sister. So...what about you?"

Charlotte averted her eyes. "What...could I do?"

Allen could tell she was sick with worry. So he tried to address those worries one by one. "I'll be honest. I don't know how Natalia feels about you. I guess there's a possibility that she holds a grudge against you. So for now, I think it's wise to avoid seeing her face-to-face. We should observe how things lie first."

"Yes..." Charlotte nodded. Her voice was barely a whisper. She

looked down at her hands in silence.

But Allen smirked. "If you wish, though...I can let you meet your sister while hiding your true identity."

"Oh?" With a little gasp, her face snapped up. "Y-You can do that?"

"Yes. If I use magic, that is. But it's still a thorny problem."

Judging from Natalia's behavior now, it was plausible that she might be aggressive toward Charlotte even in disguise. Without realizing that her older sister was right in front of her, Natalia might spew out bitter resentment. "You might get hurt. Do you...still want to see her?"

"I..." Charlotte swallowed hard. She looked down and took a deep breath. When she looked up again, determination glowed in her eyes. "Ever since she was born, I've been forced to call her 'Lady Natalia.' The only sisterly thing I've been able to do for her was read her a few picture books... I couldn't do anything else for her. But she's always called me her older sister... Those moments with her are the only memories I cherish from my life at the Duke's home."

Charlotte clenched her fists and looked straight into Allen's eyes. "I don't mind if she hates me or has a grudge against me. If I run away now, I'll always regret it in the future. So...please, Allen. Please let me see Natalia! I want to face my sister properly!" Her voice was firm as she poured out her heart.

"Good! Well said!" Allen clapped his hands and exclaimed with delight. Then he pointed at Harvey. "Uncle! I need you to forge identification papers for Charlotte! I'll smuggle her into the school as my personal assistant."

"Ah ha ha, but bro! That's like, actually illegal!" Eluka burst out, laughing a bit.

Harvey smirked. "And easy as pie. I'll use my status as the Headmaster and have them ready in no time."

"I'll take care of passes for Roo and Gosetsu too, so they can accompany her," Liselotte added.

"Woo-hoo! We're gonna say hi to Mommy's little sis!"

"Have no fear, Lady Charlotte. Your humble servants will be right beside you."

"Thank you, everyone..." Charlotte murmured, moved by their support.

And so, the Crawford family began a strategy meeting, plunging into a whirl of activity. The parents took such a liking to Charlotte that they brought out heaps of sweets and savory dishes. Though the meeting was derailed here and there because the curious parents tried to coax out every detail about her days with Allen, they finally decided to carry out their plan on the following day.

Apparently, the garden they had seen in the mirror was a hangout for Natalia's clique. It was rare for anyone else to set foot in the area. Natalia's reputation as a child prodigy who achieved extraordinary progress in only three months had spread throughout the academy, and the only people who proactively sought her company were her faithful followers and the rival cliques who looked on her advancement in distaste.

"Hey, I want a word." Allen stepped into the garden with a casual greeting.

Natalia and her gang were startled by the stranger's sudden appearance. The group had been chatting and laughing, sitting in a circle around Natalia, but they all fell silent and glared at the intruder. Sensing the mob's hostility, Charlotte held her breath behind Allen.

But Allen only grinned nonchalantly. He looked at Natalia, who sat on the edge of the fountain, and asked in an insolent tone, "You there, little girl. You're Natalia, aren't you?"

There was a pause. "Who...are you?" Natalia asked in a low growl as she took a bite from a corn dog. She clearly had her guard up. She stared at Allen, sizing him up. She seemed to be calmly trying to discern whether the stranger was friend or foe. At the same time, she was fully prepared to parry any attacks. She subtly checked the position of her followers, and she leaned forward ever so slightly so that she could leap into action at any moment. Allen could see she had come through many fierce battles.

And she only started learning magic three months ago... Some terrifying talent, Allen thought. If Natalia had stayed at home, living as the daughter of a Duke, it was likely that her talent would never have blossomed. Whether this would prove fortunate or unfortunate, Allen didn't know. He shelved the question and flashed an affected smile.

"First, allow me to introduce myself. I'm Allen Crawford. I'm here as a temporary instructor."

"Crawford...? You're not related to the Headmaster, are you?" Natalia asked.

"Oh! I know who he is, Boss! He's the school's Dark Overlord!" one of the followers exclaimed, pointing a finger at Allen.

An uneasy murmur ran through the gang. "The Dark Overlord? You mean...*that* Dark Overlord? The one who blew the fourth lab to smithereens?!"

"I heard he cleared the school's toughest dungeon in five minutes...though it's supposed to take at least three hours," another follower muttered.

"I thought he beat up a hundred students who challenged him all

at once, pummeled a third of the faculty, clobbered the living daylights out of the Headmaster, and fled the island... *That* monster has come back?!"

"Hmph...don't flatter me so much. You're embarrassing me." Allen basked in the sound of his old nickname, the fear and awe it inspired in the group. It certainly had a different flavor than Miach's casual "Dark Lord."

"I don't think they're complimenting you..." Charlotte whispered to him.

Natalia narrowed her eyes. "I get who *you* are...but who's that behind you?"

"Ah, she's my assistant... Go on, introduce yourself."

"Oh, y-yes." Charlotte awkwardly stepped forward in front of Allen. She was in her usual clothes, with her usual hair. The only thing that was different about her was the thick, dorky glasses she wore. It could hardly be considered a disguise. Charlotte, rigid from nerves, bowed to her sister. "I-I'm...Char. It's nice to meet you."

"Char, huh..." Natalia repeated the name, stunned as if something struck her, but she didn't say anything more. She went back to glaring at Allen. "And? What does the 'Dark Overlord' and his assistant want with me?"

"Simple, really. The Headmaster commissioned me directly to instruct the problem child. Feel free to think of me as your personal mentor," said Allen, holding out his hand.

Natalia didn't take it. "Tch... He should mind his own business. I don't care." She gobbled up the rest of her corn dog and stood. "I don't need a mentor. Leave me alone. Let's go, everyone."

"Y-Yes, Boss!"

Natalia left the garden, leading her followers.

"Not bad for first contact," Allen said with a shrug. "What do you think, Charlotte...uh, Charlotte?!"

Charlotte was rooted to the spot, tears streaming down her face. She clung to Allen's robe and sobbed, "I-I really had a conversation with Natalia! I...I'm so glad I mustered up my courage!"

"Did that count as a conversation?!" Allen had exchanged a few sentences with Natalia, but Charlotte had only said her alias. Seeing her weep because of such a small interaction, he didn't know how to react.

Gosetsu and Roo, who had been hiding in the bushes just in case it turned into a brawl, popped their heads out and shot him grilling looks.

"Hey look, Allen's making Mommy cry. He's a bad boy."

"I believe this calls for some punishment."

"You saw the whole thing, didn't you?! Don't stir up trouble!"

Allen snapped at them. He turned back to Charlotte and helplessly tried to soothe her. “Calm down, Charlotte. If you’re like this now, how will you cope with what’s coming up?”

“Wh-What’s coming up?! Do you think something even more amazing is going to happen...?!”

“Well, of course there will be...” He pictured Charlotte and Natalia spending time together as close sisters. “I think you’ll do much more than talk. You might have meals together, share a bed, go on trips—uh, Charlotte?! Don’t pass out here, Charlotte!”

“Ah...” She murmured as she collapsed on the spot. Allen desperately tried to revive her.

“Mommy’s a bit keyed up today,” Roo commented.

“She must be emotional after the reunion with her sister.”

Eventually, Charlotte calmed down and her tears dried up. She took off the glasses and wiped her puffy eyes. “She really didn’t recognize me... These enchanted glasses are amazing.”

“Well, for something that I cobbled together, it went well.”

The glasses looked like any old pair from every angle, but Allen had cast a spell on them that made the wearer look like a totally different person to anyone who looked at them. It had the same estranging effect on the wearer’s voice. He adapted the spell from the one he’d used to disguise Roo when he and Charlotte had gone on their first date.

Charlotte let out a sigh of admiration at Allen’s summary. “It really is incredible what magic can do... Do you think I could cast spells like this, if I practice a lot?”

“Of course. I’m sure you’ll master spells on this level in no time. It’s a good opportunity—you can learn the basics of magic while we’re here.”

“Yes please! I’d love to!” Charlotte brightened up.

“But the problem is Natalia,” Gosetsu sighed with a frown. *“It’s going to be difficult to get closer to her when she’s so guarded.”*

“Yeah, she was prickly. Are you sure you can get through to her?” Roo asked dubiously.

“We’ll have to take it slow—gain her trust bit by bit. Let’s be patient. Right, Charlotte?” Allen said.

“Y-Yes. I’ll try hard not to cry next time!”

“And no blacking out.”

“I’ll...do my best!” Charlotte tightened her fists, holding them up in front of her chest.

And so, the first day of their infiltration mission came to an end with only a brief face-off.

The next day, Allen and Charlotte sneaked into the large lecture hall.

“Hey, Natalia. I see you’re attending class today,” Allen called to Natalia, who was sitting at the back of the hall.

She scowled like she really meant it. “Tch...You’re back already.”

Ignoring her look of contempt, he sat down next to her. Charlotte timidly followed suit. Natalia was also surrounded by her minions, of course. But they merely gave a nod to Allen and Charlotte without showing any clear hint of hostility. It even seemed like they were trying to ignore the two.

Allen stroked his chin thoughtfully. “Hm. You ordered them to leave us alone, didn’t you?”

“Naturally. Your target is only me, after all.” She narrowed her eyes at him and let out a tired sigh. “I looked into you, the Dark Overlord of the Crawfords. You’ve left behind quite a few legends. Picking a fight with the likes of you for no reason would do us all harm and no good. I told my followers that we should keep calm, to wait and see how you proceed. Besides, there’s no need to get them involved. It’s enough for me to stand in the line of fire by myself.”

Allen was impressed by her dignity as a leader. “Are you sure you’re only seven years old...?”

In the meantime, the lecture was in progress. The instructor was an elderly professor with a bent back. He was scrawling line after line of complex formulae on the blackboard, and his explanations were full of technical jargon. Every student in the packed hall seemed to have their hands full just scribbling down notes, and most of them looked like they didn’t actually grasp what was being said.

Allen glanced at the blackboard and felt nostalgic. He’d had the same lesson years ago. “The Applied Science of the Five Great Elements of Magic, huh. Can you follow it?” he asked Natalia.

“Actually, I’m bored out of my mind. I can learn basics like this just by reading a book.” Natalia shrugged, casting an eye over the blackboard. Then she rose to her feet and announced in a clear, sonorous voice, “Professor, there’s a mistake in your formula. Casting a lightning spell under those conditions should increase its impact much more.”

“Ah...oh yes, you’re quite right. Apologies—when you get to be as old as me, the mind wanders, you see...” With a sheepish smile, the professor corrected the error Natalia had pointed out.

Murmurs of wonder rose from here and there. Snatches of conversation, like the words “child prodigy,” were heard, but Natalia sat back down, coolly oblivious to the whispers.

Allen whistled. “Hunh. Not bad.”

“Your compliments make no difference to me.” Natalia looked

away coldly. Though they sat side by side, they might as well have been separated by an abyss.

Hm. It's good to see she's a bright student, but we've got a long way to go... Allen's mission was to guide Natalia to mend her ways, but his goal was really to draw her and Charlotte together. And for that, it was important they get to know each other first. But at this rate, he had no idea if they could even clear the first step.

Hmm...we need some kind of trigger... When he was an instructor dealing with cocky students, Allen simply let his fists—or rather, the gap between their powers—do the talking. With that method, the students would quickly turn docile, and they told him whatever he wanted them to share. But that wouldn't work this time. He wanted to avoid any brute force methods that might sow seeds of trouble for the future.

In other words, he had no other choice but to get closer to her through persistent efforts. She was so tightly guarded that he didn't know where to start. He was still pondering how to make his next move when Charlotte broke her silence.

"W-Wow, you're so smart... I can't understand any of it," she murmured. She was gazing at her little sister with sincere respect.

"Huh?" Natalia knitted her brows suspiciously. "You're supposed to be the Dark Overlord's assistant, aren't you? How could you not follow such an elementary lesson?"

"Oh, um..." Charlotte clammed up. Allen noticed at once that it wasn't because her sister said something harsh, but because she was moved by the fact that Natalia had addressed her. Charlotte suppressed her emotion and gave an awkward smile. "I-I'm sorry. I only started learning magic very recently, actually..."

"Really?" Natalia widened her eyes in surprise. Her spiky, formidable aura softened just a little.

Allen didn't miss the shift. *Hm...?* He thought about it for a moment, and decided to push their luck. Allen put a hand on Charlotte's shoulder and said, "She's just starting out. While I'm on a mission here, I'm thinking of having her study magic from scratch. Right, Char?"

"Y-Yes. I don't have any experience, but I'll do my best," Charlotte said with a bow.

"Hunh..." Natalia seemed at a loss. She'd judged Allen to be someone who should be regarded with caution, but she couldn't quite decide what to do with Char, who was obviously harmless.

"Um...N-Natalia..." Charlotte called meekly. "You seem to know so much already. You must've worked very hard?"

"Th-This is nothing. It's the most basic of the basics."

"But still, it's impressive. Even in this lecture hall, there are so

many grown-ups studying, but you're more than keeping up with them... I truly respect you for that!"

"Age doesn't matter in this academy—it's a meritocracy, so..." Natalia mumbled, looking away.

Her words were still prickly, but her thorns had mostly fallen out now. Allen delivered the final blow with a mischievous grin. "This is perfect, Char. Why don't you ask this child prodigy here to teach you the basics of magic?"

"Huh? Why me...?" Natalia pulled a face.

"Y-Yes, Allen. I'd be sorry to get in the way of her studies," Charlotte said hastily. But she put her palms together and went on hesitantly, "B-But, if you happen to have any spare time...if you could teach me even just a little...um...I might pass out from joy!" she declared with gusto.

"Is it such a big deal...?"

"Oh, don't worry. I'll do my best and stay conscious!"

"But really, why...?" Natalia stared at Charlotte, not hiding her confusion. But when she realized that Charlotte was completely in earnest, she averted her gaze and mumbled, "I have a duel with another class after this, but I wouldn't mind giving you a lesson during this lecture."

"R-Really?!" Charlotte smiled like a blossoming flower.

A hint of a smile played on Natalia's face. "But only a short one. Dark Overlord, you're in the way. Step aside." She shoed him away.

"All right, all right." He gave up his seat to Charlotte, and the sisters' lesson began. Natalia opened her notebook, drew a graph, and started on her explanation.

"So, first things first—the Five Great Elements of Magic is like this... And the lightning spell that came up in the lecture is..."

Charlotte listened intently, but she also stole furtive glances at her sister. Her little sister, whom she had longed to be reunited with ever since she fled from home, was right there beside her. Her heart was full. Allen could sense how touched she was as he watched them from behind.

Good good, at least Charlotte's getting closer to her. Is it because Charlotte's a woman? To Allen, women seemed to be better at getting a child to open up. But he had a suspicion that there was another, completely different reason. Or is Natalia seeing a shadow of her older sister in Char...? I wonder which one. Stroking his chin thoughtfully, Allen watched over the sisters enjoying their first lesson.





The Athena School of Magic was vast, and there were a considerable number of facilities on the island-campus.

In particular, numerous student cafeterias dotted the island here and there. There were all kinds. Some specialized in the cuisines of certain species, others were slightly more high-end restaurants. But the most popular spot was the cafeteria that offered huge portions at cheap prices. It was a student haven; you only needed one silver coin to eat to your fill. So naturally, the spacious cafeteria was bustling with students.

Natalia and her clique sat at one of the tables. Of course, Allen and Charlotte had insisted on tagging along. When they first sat down, the group glowered at them, looking dissatisfied. But now, they were acting completely different.

“Wow...” Natalia’s followers stared, mouths hanging open, without even touching their lunches. Color had drained from all their faces, and their eyes were fixed on Charlotte. However, Charlotte herself didn’t notice their attention to her. She was just watching Roo and Gosetsu wolf down their lunches with an affectionate smile.

“Is it yummy, Roo and Gosetsu?”

“Yup! *It’s nice they have food for magical beasts here,*” Roo said.

“*Their fare is more refined than the old days. I can only imagine the untiring efforts of the cooks,*” Gosetsu observed.

“Oh, have you been here before, Gosetsu?” Charlotte asked.

“Yes. *A long time ago, I transformed into my human guise and went on a pleasure trip. The school was smaller back then, but the lively atmosphere hasn’t changed at all.*”

“*You’ve really been everywhere, Granny.*”

The two happily munched away at their lunch made specifically for magical beasts. Charlotte chattered with them, slowly eating her own student lunch. For Allen, this was an everyday scene, but certainly not for the others. Even Natalia stood frozen with her trays in her hands, quivering in silence.

“A-An Infernal Capybara and a young Fenrir?! What are you...?!” Natalia murmured.

“Oh?” Charlotte looked up, round-eyed, realizing for the first time that all eyes were turned on her. She was attracting the attention of other students in the cafeteria too. There was a little circle of space around Charlotte and the beasts, even though the rest of the cafeteria was packed. The students kept a wide berth, whispering to each other.

She tilted her head in puzzlement and whispered to Allen, who was sitting next to her. “I know I get this often...but is it really so

shocking?”

“Well, Fenrirs are one of the most famous rare species,” Allen replied, smacking his lips at his extra large bowl of ramen and half portion of fried rice. The ramen had more noodles than toppings, and the soup was greasy, but he was hooked on the flavor. Between slurps of noodles, he gave Charlotte a brief lesson on the rare species. “Only a very small number of beast tamers in the world have been able to befriend a Fenrir. And what’s more, Fenrirs with a silver coat like Roo are especially rare. So if you were to enter a show, you’d easily become a legend.”

“Heh heh, Roo’s extra special!” Roo chirruped.

“Oho, and the legendary tale of the saintly woman who befriended a Fenrir about 500 years ago is still a favorite of the bards and a popular legend among the masses. I, on the other hand, am a mere rodent,” Gosetsu said.

“And *this* one is generally a gentle creature, but they can turn as ferocious as a raging bull at the smallest provocation,” Allen added.

“Yes, I remember well...” Charlotte nodded solemnly, Gosetsu’s kidnapping incident still fresh in her memory.

For a layperson, Infernal Capybaras might appear no different from the similar animals with a drowsy face, often encountered in zoos. However, for those who’d learned a little magic, they more resembled a sleeping tiger one should never awaken. Allen had never heard of a beast tamer who was served by both a Fenrir and an Infernal Capybara.

Natalia sat down across from Charlotte and let out a sigh of incredulity. “You’ve already achieved so much as a beast tamer... Is there any point in learning magic?”

“But I haven’t achieved anything—it’s only dear Roo and Gosetsu who are so impressive.” Charlotte smiled sheepishly, touching her cheek. “Allen and my friends have always been protecting me. But I have to grow too... I decided I’ll become stronger, so that I can confront anything and anyone that comes my way.”

“To confront...huh.” Natalia’s face stiffened a little.

Charlotte smiled brightly at her sister and clenched her fists. “So I’m going to practice the lightning magic you taught me earlier too! I’ll do my best to master it!”

“Well, that one is a little difficult...so if you have any questions, you can ask me.”

“Really?! Thank you so much, Natalia!”

“It’s nothing...” Natalia mumbled. “It’s the duty of the strong to provide for the weak.” Though she looked away, a hint of red rose to her cheeks. Natalia was definitely warming up to Charlotte even faster than Allen had hoped for.

“You found a good teacher, Char. Lucky you.” he said with a grin. “That spell is the type that stops the enemy’s movement, so it’ll be a big help when you have to stand up to overwhelming muscle.”

“That means you can use it on Allen when he does something stupid. Good for you, Mommy.”

“I-I’m not going to do anything like that, Roo—oh?” Charlotte’s eyes caught on Natalia’s lunch tray. “By the way, Natalia...is that all you’re going to eat?”

“Huh? It’s plenty, isn’t it?” Natalia replied. She was having a hamburger with french fries, plus orange juice. She clearly had a preference for junk food, what with the yakisoba bun and the corn dog. Allen guessed she might’ve gotten hooked on commoners’ food after coming here, since she grew up in a noble family.

“You should eat some veggies too!” Charlotte said hotly. “I’ll get you some salad or something!”

“Uh, n-no, it’s fine...” Natalia stammered.

“Shall I escort you?” Gosetsu offered.

“Don’t worry, it’s just over there. I’ll be back in a minute!”

Charlotte replied and hurried off to the counter.

“Take care,” Allen called out after her.

“Okay...?” Natalia stared at Charlotte, bewildered. She tilted her head as she nibbled on her fries. “She’s such a strange person... Why is she so fixated on me? It doesn’t seem like she’s doing it just because it’s her job.”

“Ah, she has a little sister back in her hometown, around the same age as you. Maybe she’s seeing her in you,” Allen commented vaguely. He wasn’t lying, though it wasn’t the whole truth either. Charlotte must’ve been excited that she could do something sisterly for Natalia.

“I see... That makes sense.” Natalia gave a small nod.

Natalia’s followers fearfully started talking to Roo and Gosetsu. Some of them could even speak in the language of magical beasts. “U-Umm... *‘Hello?’*”

“Hullooo!” Roo barked back.

“Yes yes, don’t be shy. I thoroughly approve of youths who can proffer a salutation.”

“What’s she saying?” one student murmured to another.

“I can catch some of what the Fenrir’s saying, but I can’t really follow the Infernal Capybara... I think she’s using a super old version of the standard language. Could be even from a thousand years ago...”

“Just how old is she...?”

Though some of the followers quivered in fear, the gathering was beginning to feel like a friendly lunch.

Meanwhile, Natalia had been eyeing Allen warily as he slurped his noodles. Eventually, she let out a little sigh. “I suppose now’s a good

time. There's something I want to ask you, while Char's away."

"What is it?"

"Were you...sent by the Evans family? Are you acting under my family's orders?"

"No," Allen answered firmly.

"Thought as much," Natalia said with a shrug. "I doubt my family will try to intervene at this point, and besides, if they were to do something, they'd send someone much more straitlaced and lackluster. I just wanted to make sure."

"I'm honored you believed in me. Though, what *would* you have done if you found out I was under your family's influence?"

"I'll send you packing, obviously," Natalia said coolly, chomping on her hamburger. The way she ate was pretty wild—she didn't seem to mind if sauce got around her mouth. "Any relation to that house makes me want to vomit. I have to exterminate the vermin for my mental health."

"Vermin,' huh... Sounds like you really despise them."

"Yes. It gives me chills to think I'm related to them by blood." A thin smile flickered on her sauce-smeared lips. "We're a typical noble family. Only worth our name. My father's only interest is keeping the house alive. As for my mother, she's pathetic. She goes around all pompous and proud just because she gave birth to an heiress. And the servants are all good-for-nothing puppets. They're a despicable family, through and through."

"Y-You don't hold back, do you..."

"Of course not. I have the right to say this much. That woman has never even read a picture book to me, let alone held me—not once in my life. She left everything up to my nurse. How can I call her my mother?" Natalia's words were acerbic, but there was no sorrow in her voice. She kept on grumbling about her family while munching on the junk food, as if her sarcastic remarks made a nice side dish.

Hm. It seems years of pent-up frustration exploded once she came here. At first he'd assumed that Natalia had gone astray because she was suddenly shipped off to a remote island after a childhood of luxury and attention... But apparently, the truth was that she had borne bitter resentment toward her family for years. And she was spewing it out to him, who was practically a stranger to her. That candor alone gave him a sense of just how much she couldn't stand her family. "Let me guess... Did you work so hard to study magic so you could break away from your family?"

"That's part of it... If I can use magic, I can deal with most things in the world however I want," she asserted after a little hesitation. Natalia wasn't going through some childlike phase of rebellion. It ran much deeper. She had made a decision, a serious resolution.

Then...what does she think about Charlotte? The only people Natalia had derided so far were her father, mother, and the servants. Allen was waiting for her to bring up her older sister, but the name never came. So he decided to try tricking her into telling him. He nodded along to Natalia's scathing speech, looking for the right timing.

"Well, I can imagine you've gone through some hard times. I read it in the paper, that scandal your older sister stirred up. What was her name again? Cha—" Allen suddenly stopped talking. He couldn't say any more.

Natalia had frozen in place and was staring intently at him. A fire blazed in her deep crimson eyes that would make anyone shiver. Sheer hostility emanated from her. It was enough to startle even Allen.

"Never speak that name in my presence again. It's unpleasant," Natalia said curtly.

After a pause, Allen said, "Understood," holding up both hands in surrender.

Gosetsu, who had been chatting amiably with the followers, threw him a glance to tell him in telepathy: *It was fortunate that Lady Charlotte wasn't here to see that. It seems the young lady harbors some rather strong feelings about her.*

The tricky part to untangle is what those "strong feelings" are, Allen responded silently. Did Natalia feel the same kind of resentment toward Charlotte that she felt toward her parents? Or was it yet another intense emotion? Until they could be sure of the nature of her feelings, it seemed best to avoid a direct confrontation between Charlotte and Natalia.

Natalia clammed up, nibbling on what was left of her fries. Just when Allen had been feeling like she was starting to open up to him a little, she'd put up an insurmountable wall between them again. *This is definitely not going to be smooth sailing, that's for sure.* Allen sighed and returned to slurping up his noodles, now a bit soggy.

That was when unwelcome guests approached Natalia's table.

"What's this? Fancy seeing you here, Natalia," said someone in a smug voice.

They turned around to find a blue-haired young boy standing behind them. He was around ten, though the sneer on his well-proportioned face was rather cold and aloof for his age. More than ten burly human students towered behind him. He was clearly a king of the hill.

"Hm, friend of yours? Didn't know you had any besides your followers," Allen teased.

"Don't, you're making me sick. He's definitely *not* a friend." Natalia scowled, throwing an intimidating glare at the boy. "What do you want, Chris?"

“Oh nothing, I was just passing by. I heard you beat down the blacksmith class.” He clapped at her in a theatrical gesture. “Let me be the first to offer you my congratulations. They’re a pretty strong bunch, but I’m not surprised you crushed them.”

“Hmph, of course I did. They’re far below my level.”

“That’s what I expect of my rival. But...” Chris paused and narrowed his eyes at Natalia. “Don’t get ahead of yourself. Your reign will be over soon. I’ll be the one to bury you with a eulogy.”

“Hah. Small dogs bark the loudest.”

“Bark, huh... Don’t you mean your followers? It smells like beasts around you, as always.”

“What did you say...?” Natalia’s followers rose to the bait. “Don’t think you can get away with—”

“Just ignore him, everyone.” Natalia suppressed them, glaring back at the boy. “Reacting to such a lowlife will only bring down your own dignity.”

“How dare you!” Chris shouted.

Raging sparks flew between the two mobs, and a heavy silence pervaded the air.

The only sound came from Allen, who was casually slurping his ramen. *I see how it is. They’re archrivals.* The boy looked like he was excelling in his studies beyond his age. People around him must’ve fawned over him as a child prodigy before Natalia came along and took his place in less than three months. No wonder he was sour.

Eventually, Natalia seemed to tire of the glaring contest and shook her head. “If you’ll excuse me, we’re in the middle of a meal. If you want to duel me again, make an appointment. That’s common courtesy.”

“Tch... You think you’re so cool. Come on, guys.” Chris spun around and departed with his posse.

The atmosphere was gloomy now, but Allen enjoyed his ramen and fried rice down to the very last grain and noodle. *Ah, fresh youth. I remember the times.* He, too, had been challenged by a number of his classmates. And he had mercilessly knocked down every single one of them. *Though I never had any followers...hm. In that sense, perhaps Natalia’s ways are more wholesome?*

Allen was just coming to this peaceful thought when there was a small squeal nearby.

“Eep!”

His head snapped up. Charlotte had fallen to the floor, her eyes wide. Apparently, one of Chris’s followers had bumped into her. The tray and the salad she’d been carrying were scattered at her feet. Charlotte scrambled to pick them up.

“Ah...I-I’m sorry! I’ll clean this up right away...!”

“Tch, watch where you’re going,” the student scoffed with a frown. “You’re in the way. Hurry up and get—”

“You insolent scum!” someone roared and sent the guy flying, drawing a clean arch in the air.

It wasn’t Allen. Natalia had dealt him a flying knee kick out of the blue, using a simple spell called Body Fortify. Even Allen was impressed by the speed of her attack.

“Y-You...! You’ll pay for this!!!” Chris fumed. He and his followers were riled up at the sight of their friend knocked out by a single blow.

“I taught him some manners for you. You should be thanking me.” Natalia slowly rose to her full height and glared at Chris. Her cool composure from a minute ago had vanished. It seemed like her hair was bristling with anger. “Your follower should be ashamed for striking out at a woman!” she snarled. “Never mind appointments! I’ll take you on here and now—”

“Come come, Natalia.” Allen approached her from behind and put a hand on her shoulder. For a moment, he thought she had guessed Charlotte’s true identity, but it seemed she couldn’t bear to see someone treating a woman cruelly. Her sense of justice was remarkable, but he couldn’t let her be reckless. With a wry smile, he gestured at the scene around her. Many students were watching the altercation, keeping a good distance. “Look around you. This is a cafeteria, remember. It’s full of other students. I can’t say I approve of starting a brawl in a place like this.”

“What?! Char is *your* assistant! Are you just going to sit back and let them hurt her?!” Natalia shouted.

“Ha ha ha. That’s a good one.” Allen grinned. It was one of the funniest jokes he’d heard recently. The laugh vanished from his face, and he said in a low tone, “Who said I’m going to forgive them?”

“Huh?” Just as Natalia widened her eyes a little, Allen snapped his fingers.

Streaks of blinding blue light shot over the floor, and a wall of light rose up to the ceiling. It formed a box that separated Allen, Natalia, Chris, and their groups from the rest of the students in the cafeteria.

Chris’s crew stared up at the barrier, wide-eyed. “Wha—? A barrier?! This big, in a split second?!”

“Stay calm!” Chris bellowed at his gang, who were in a muddle. “The barrier’s weak point is clear! Attack the one who cast the spell!”

“R-Roger!”

Three of the followers intoned a spell, drew their weapons, and leaped at Allen. Their bearing and the accuracy of their incantation set them apart from the average thug. But in Allen’s eyes, it was still like children playing games.

“Listen up, Natalia. There are three key points in a fight,” Allen explained calmly as Natalia watched on, round-eyed. “Cut off the enemy’s retreat. Don’t let any of them slip away. And last, the most important thing is...!”

“Gyah?!”

“Arghh?!”

“Aieeee?!”

Allen parried the attacks of the trio who came at him with swift, light strikes using his elbows and palms, and as he passed them, restraining their limbs with magic ice. In one fluid motion, he thwacked them to the ground.

Of course, he could’ve bound them in blocks of ice with a single spell, as Harvey had done in the harbor the other day. But he had a good reason for keeping the binding to a minimum and punching them instead: he simply wanted to punish them physically with his own hands. He relished their screams, and he preferred to keep things flashy.

With three of their members blacking out in such a humiliating way, Chris’s gang was even more unsettled.

The corners of Allen’s lips twisted up into a beastly grin. “The most important thing in a fight... Break their hearts so thoroughly that they’ll never even think of defying you again! That’s the best way to blow off steam!!!”

“Heh...so that’s your creed, is it?” Natalia gave a well-mannered titter. But the next moment, her smile transformed into something savage. “You took the words right out of my mouth, Dark Overlord! I couldn’t agree more!”

“Mwa ha ha ha! You know what you’re talking about!” Allen turned to the rest of the gang. “Come, you scrawny brats! I’ll turn you all into stains on the floor! Get ready for it!!!”

“Wh-What the hell is this guy?!” Chris’s followers spluttered. “Ah! Isn’t he the Dark Overlord?! He came back?!”

“Rahhhh! Follow the boss and the Dark Overlord!” Natalia’s gang rushed forward too. “We’ll show ’em what we’re made of!”

The barrier resonated with painful shrieks and furious howls as a chaotic battle broke out.

Roo padded up to Charlotte, who was still sitting on the floor, stunned at the scene. “*You okay, Mommy? Can we jump into the fight too? I’ll get back at them for you!*”

“*You only need to give the go ahead, Lady Charlotte, and I shall turn this battlefield into a sea of blood in an instant,*” Gosetsu said.

“N-No, don’t do that! I only fell! Everyone, stop! Allen...please stop!”

“Weak, weak, weak—you’re all wusses! Is that all you’ve got, you

pathetic worms?! Don't think you can get away so easily after harming my Char! I'll make you regret that you were ever born!"

"Gyahhhhh!!!"

"I don't think he can hear you..." Roo remarked.

"This is awful! G-Gosetsu! My wand!"

"Here you are." Gosetsu whipped out her wand.

Wielding the wand high in the air, Charlotte shouted at the top of her voice, "Fighting is really naughty!" The lightning spell that she'd only just learned from Natalia—nonlethal but strong enough to knock out a bear with a single blow—zapped through the air and struck Allen square in the head.



One hour later—Allen and Natalia were sitting side by side in Natalia's usual garden, their feet tucked in under them and their backs straight as a rod. A sign of shame hung from their necks, reading "I got in a fight at the cafeteria and made a commotion." Charlotte sat in front of them, giving them a thorough lecture.

"I'm grateful you stood up for me. But you both went too far. You mustn't resort to violence."

"I'm sorry..." Allen said.

"You too, Natalia. Putting yourself in such danger... What if you get injured?"

"If I did, I can just use magic to heal myself, though—ah, I mean, I'm sorry." Natalia started to talk back, but she bowed her head obediently when she saw that Charlotte's face clouded over.

"And you too, everyone! No fighting!"

"Right..." Natalia's followers gave half-hearted replies, sitting stiff-backed behind their leader.

When the lightning had struck Allen, his barrier had come undone. Chris and his gang fled for their lives, shouting behind them the corny line, "You'll pay for this!"

Allen stole glances at Charlotte giving a stern lecture to everyone, and let out a thoughtful, admiring sigh. "Ah, to think there'd come a day when you wallop me with a spell and sit me down for a lecture on top of that... The young girl who couldn't even punch a sandbag has grown so much..."

"Well, it *was* impressive that she managed to cast the spell so perfectly on the spot, on her very first try...but why do *you* look so satisfied?" Natalia looked a little creeped out by Allen's fond praise of Char.

"I wonder, though," Roo murmured, cocking her head. *"I would've thought Allen could dodge Mommy's spell. She wasn't very sneaky about it."*

"No no, Young Roo... That's something you shan't ask." Gosetsu shook her head with a sagacious look and put her paw on the pup's shoulder. *"There are things in this world that we don't need to know. This is one of them."*

"Aww, how come? I wanna know. I could've dodged it too."

"Hmph... Isn't it obvious? I did it to give her the experience of success," Allen said quietly.

"Experience? Huh?" Roo was still baffled.

Allen smirked at Roo. "The most crucial thing for using magic is a strong, resilient mind. Believing in your own abilities gives you power. The experience of knocking over a veteran wizard like me with one spell will definitely give her confidence. Next time she's up against an enemy in a scuffle, she won't be afraid to strike out."

"So you're saying...you got hit on purpose? For Mommy's sake?"

"Exactly." Allen nodded casually. He still felt tingling in his body, but it was a small price to pay in exchange for boosting Charlotte's confidence. He thought the girls would shower him with praises for his commitment, but instead—

"It makes my skin crawl. What kind of twisted love is that?" Natalia shuddered.

"You were right, Granny. Wish I never asked..."

"I'm glad you understand, Young Roo."

The three of them eyed him coldly. Allen couldn't understand their reaction at all.

Charlotte, oblivious to their conversation, was continuing her lecture to the followers. Since they could tell that she was only doing all this out of concern for their safety, they listened solemnly. But eventually, they exchanged looks and let out a heavy sigh.

"It's hard not to fight..." they mumbled. "Usually, it's other people trying to pick fights with us. We've never started anything from our side."

"R-Really?" Charlotte blinked and looked at Natalia.

Natalia gave a leisurely nod. "Oh yes. Everyone here is an academy misfit."

In a closed community like a school, outsiders like them—who stood out for things like coming from a poor background; being born with different fur or scales from others in their species; or being extremely bad at a certain kind of magic—became an easy target for bullies. Natalia's followers, too, had been harassed or scorned by other students. They certainly hadn't been having a smooth school life.

"So I helped them out of their predicament. I loathe anyone who bullies the weak," Natalia said.

"But thanks to that, a lot of people hold grudges against Boss," a follower explained.

“Ah, I’m sorry, Boss...it’s all our fault...” another choked back tears.

“Do be quiet! I got involved by my own will! You have no business apologizing to me. How many times do I have to tell you that?” Natalia barked at them.

“I see now. You were just protecting them,” Allen said. Come to think of it, it was true—both in the scene they saw in the mirror and in the cafeteria today, the other side was the one picking fights.

“That’s right.” Natalia hunched her shoulders wearily. “All I want to do is to hone my skills here. I can’t wait to get stronger. Chris and the others are useful for combat practice...but they just keep coming back, no matter how much I beat them down. These days, I’m getting quite tired of it, to be honest.”

“Hmm, I’m finally starting to see the problems you’re dealing with,” Allen remarked. Her overflowing talent, her noble sense of justice, and her ruthless measures against her opponents the moment she recognized them as enemies—the combination of these qualities in her must have inflamed her clashes with others in the academy. “How did you respond to them each time they challenged you to a fight?”

“Normally we’d just fight it out like we did today. If someone comes at us, we just beat them up. I’m good at any kind of magic, but I often fight with my bare hands, using magic to boost my physical strength.”

“Hm, you have good taste. As expected, I must say.” Allen nodded slowly.

“Fought it out with your bare hands...?” Charlotte paled. As an older sister, she was worried sick.

Allen stroked his chin. “In that case, the solution is simple. There’s just one thing you have to do, Natalia.”

“I doubt you would but...you’re not about to tell me something ridiculous, like go and make friends with them, are you?” Natalia frowned.

“No. Exactly the opposite.” Allen put a hand on her shoulder. He peered into her youthful face and said, with a warm smile, “Natalia. You should conquer this academy.”

“What...?” Natalia and the others stared with their mouths hanging open.

“You know why the enemy keeps coming back to challenge you, no matter how many times you beat them up? It’s because you’re being too soft on them. I’ll teach you the most efficient way to fight. That way, you’ll quickly be free of enemies here.”

If Allen could lead her to victory, Natalia would be able to spend her school days in peace, and Allen might be able to gain her full trust. Two birds with one stone.

But Charlotte fretted over them, looking pallid. “F-Fighting is bad. If Natalia gets hurt... I’m so worried just thinking about it...”

“Don’t worry, Char. What I’m proposing isn’t a simple brawl. I’ll make sure the risk is kept to a minimum. Even if things have to get a bit rough, she’ll be safe—I’ll give her thorough guidance on how to protect herself,” Allen explained. Of course, he didn’t have any intention to push a seven-year-old girl to do something reckless, regardless of her competence. He grinned boldly. “If you still judge that it’s too dangerous...you can try to stop me again, like you did back there.”

“Oh! U-Um, well, I don’t really want to do it again... I think I went a bit too far too...” Charlotte mumbled, hedging.

“Hm. Are you saying you can’t?” Allen gave an exaggerated shrug. “Is that how flimsy your resolve was? I thought you were determined to confront any enemy, no matter who they are.”

Charlotte drew in her breath sharply, and her face stiffened. She looked back and forth between Natalia and Allen. Eventually, she swallowed hard and gave a deep nod. “I understand. I’ll leave it to you, Allen. But when something looks bad...I’ll stop you with all my strength!”

“Mwa ha ha ha ha! Good, that’s the spirit! You’re the only one in the universe who can pull the reins on me! Take that to heart!”

“Yes! I’ll do my best!”

“Uh, would you mind not getting all fired up with me in the middle? Something’s weird about Char’s resolve too...” Natalia muttered dubiously. It was no wonder she was frowning—two people she’d just met were getting into a heated argument about her education as if they were her guardians.

“Anyway, what say you, Natalia? Will you join hands with me?” Allen asked, holding out his hand to her, just like before.

Natalia stared at his hand. “Hmph. Conquering the academy with the Dark Overlord, huh...” Her hesitation was gone in an instant. She grasped Allen’s hand with her small hand. A villainous smile tugged at her lips. “That sounds interesting. These skills might come in handy in the future too... I’ll go along with your scheme for now. But if I see that you’re useless, I’ll void our pact straightaway. Agreed?”

“Agreed. You can tremble in fear at my prowess!” He met her speech with a roar of laughter. Thus, an alliance was formed.

Supportive to the end, Natalia’s followers were getting pumped up too. “Whoa... Good luck, Boss! We’ll be rooting for you!”

A cool voice rang out from behind them. “Tsk ts. What business do you have speaking as though you are bystanders?”

“Huh?”

They spun around to find a supremely beautiful woman with a

large scar on her forehead: Gosetsu in her human form. Unlike the other day, she wasn't in a dress. This time, she wore an austere military uniform and a heavy trench coat. She held a shinai sword in one hand, striking her other hand with it in light thumps. She was the very picture of a hellish drill sergeant.

"Your weakness is at the root of the problem, isn't it? You're the reason Natalia made so many enemies. A vassal who can't even clean up their own mess is nothing but an encumbrance. Thus..." Gosetsu pointed the training sword at them and flashed a spine-chilling smile. "I shall train you so that you may be of some use in the future. No need for thanks. In the grand scheme of things, this service is for my own sovereign."

"Uh... Who *are* you?" the gang murmured.

"All right, I'll trust you with the group! But be careful not to kill them!" Allen said to Gosetsu.

Gosetsu chuckled. "Oh yes, I shall bear that in mind. Ah, how many centuries has it been since the last time I trained youths? I can hardly wait."

"Count me in! Sounds fun! I'll help out, Granny!"

"Um, Gosetsu and Roo, please don't overdo it...?" Charlotte gave a timid warning to the pair, who were already bristling with excitement.



A few days later, a young boy's desperate yell rang out in the cloudless sunset.

"Crap...! I'll get you next time! You'll pay for this!" Spitting out the usual line, Chris and his gang scuttled away.

"I'll probably forget by nighttime," Natalia called after them, casually waving at their receding figures.

Natalia was standing in front of a long staircase leading underground. The signpost next to the entrance read "School Training Dungeon (NB: Students MUST contact the office before use!)." Magical beasts roamed free inside the dungeon, which acted as a training ground where students could test their skills.

Eluka stood nearby with a binder tucked under her arm, clapping for Natalia. "And the winner in the battle to clear the dungeon fastest is—Natalia! You beat him by a lot. I mean, more than thirty minutes? Chris is a good shot, but you're on a whole different level, Natalia."

"I'm honored to have your praise, Examiner. By the way, it looked like this dungeon went on deeper... Why was it blocked?"

"Oh that. It's just spawning season for the dungeon boss. We probably better close it off more properly," Eluka murmured as she jotted down the results in the binder.

Like Allen, Eluka had long since graduated from the school, but

sometimes she did some small jobs around campus. Today, she watched over the battle between Natalia and Chris as the dungeon supervisor.

Charlotte came over with a towel and a bottle. "Well done, Natalia. I made some herbal tea... Would you like to try it?"

"Thank you very much. I'll have some." Natalia took the bottle and slowly drank the tea.

Allen walked toward them in leisurely steps. "Good, you finished in less than three hours this time. Must be your personal best, Natalia," he commended her.

"Hmph, I'm not surprised. But..." Natalia frowned and pulled out a sheet of paper from her pocket. It had a long list of names, and there was a cross drawn next to everyone except Chris. She glared in the direction where Chris had run off. "Chris is so persistent. It's just him now. The only one stupid enough to still pick fights with me."

"Well, the last bastion is always the hardest one to conquer. Let's be patient."

"If you say so." Though she still looked frustrated, she nodded. By now, her wariness around Allen had faded away completely. She stared at the column of crosses and let out a thoughtful sigh. "But we're really just a step away from conquering the whole school... I never would've imagined we could crush all the opponents except Chris in under a week. I can't believe it went so fast."

"Hmph, I told you so." Allen chuckled. The speedy resolution was the result of his efforts as Natalia's personal coach in overcoming the power struggles. "There's no need to take on a whole mob when you can just lop off the heads, one at a time. You challenge the leader to a duel in the field they're most confident in. Beat them at that, and they can't deny you're far above their level."

"It's a simple method, but very effective in making them see the hierarchy," Natalia agreed.

For students who were skilled beast tamers, she'd challenged them to a competition in capturing magical beasts. For those who specialized in potions, she'd competed with them in brewing potions. For those who were best in battle, she'd confronted them in a straightforward duel. But that wasn't all Allen had taught her.

"Hmph... Your wily tricks impressed me, Dark Overlord," Natalia said. "I never knew you could triumph over an enemy by making their people fall instead of fighting them head-on."

"Right? There's a special pleasure in winning without a fight."

When they got wind of the fact that the boss of an enemy doted on their little sister, Natalia became good friends with her. When they figured out that the enemy had a soft spot for their grandmother, Natalia gave them a set of healthy foods to supplement the diet that

was popular with elderly people. With those kinds of behind-the-scenes maneuvering alongside the competitions, everyone except Chris soon waved the white flag and left her in peace.

Allen gave a light pat on Natalia's shoulder and said with a bright smile, "For now, I'm only teaching you merciful methods because you're up against other students, but if you want, I can show you some tricks that're just within the legal boundaries. Brainwashing, blackmailing, bribing... If you use them well, there's no weapon that's more fun than those."

"Heh heh heh...interesting. I'll look forward to the lesson."

"Mwa ha ha... I have high hopes that you'll master them admirably."

"I-I think Natalia's getting more and more naughty...!" Charlotte looked pale, but she didn't try to stop Allen. She had watched over them closely over the past week, and she'd seen that he wasn't teaching her anything dangerous. Despite her many battles, Natalia hadn't suffered any injuries. This was also the fruit of Allen's training.

"Heyyy, Boss! Great job with your challenge!"

Three of Natalia's followers were running toward them, grinning from ear to ear. One of them was the dragonoid whom Natalia had whacked for getting her a croquette bun. Natalia greeted them with a smile.

"I've wrapped things up for the day. How did yours go?"

"Perfect!" the dragonoid exclaimed. The other two looked excited as well, their eyes glittering.

"I just beat—I mean, had a talk with the guy who used to treat me like a flunkey, and everything's patched up with him now!"

"And I went to the cheeky, spoiled brat of the main house of my clan, and—well, after this and that, I got him to apologize!"

"And I faced off with the asshole who slept with my girlfriend and sunk him—I mean, swam with him in the sea!"

They seemed to be mindful of Charlotte's presence nearby, reporting their feats of revenge in euphemisms. Natalia listened closely to their accounts, then smiled with satisfaction.

"Well done, everyone. I'm proud of you."

"Ah...thank you, Boss!" The trio clung to Natalia and dissolved into tears. "This is all thanks to Coach!"

Of course, by "Coach" they didn't mean Allen. As she soothed her followers, Natalia looked at the open field behind them.

"I don't know how to thank you, Coach Gosetsu. I've tried to train them up before, but...I admire your mastery of the carrot-and-stick approach. You must be a very distinguished Infernal Capybara."

"Oh no, not at all. I am but an aged creature." Gosetsu bowed respectfully from where she stood on the field. Behind her figure clad

in a military uniform and holding a whip, the rest of Natalia's followers were sprawled on the ground like heaps of corpses. While Allen guided Natalia, Gosetsu had been drilling them hard.

Gosetsu looked at the three followers who had successfully taken their revenge and gave them a glowing smile. "It's all because of your diligent, hard work that you attained your goals today. I merely gave you a hand. With that pride in your heart, keep striving in your life of devotion."

"Yes, Coach! Thank you so much!" the trio gushed. "Thank you for your training, too, Comrade Roo!"

"Hee hee. If you want me to chase after you or wrestle with you, I'll take you on anytime." Roo, who was treading on some fallen followers for fun, grinned proudly.

The tattered followers who'd been crawling on the ground hauled themselves up, their faces contorted in desperation. "Ugh... We're not finished yet, we can take more...! Please continue the training!" they exclaimed. "We've had our revenge already, but we want to become stronger! Please, Coach!"

"Ah, what commendable mettle. Well then..." Gosetsu cleared her throat a little, then bellowed, cracking the whip, "Enough rest, all of you! We don't have time to be crawling around like maggots! Get up and run one lap around the island! After that, karate kumite with me! Be prepared to be so crushed you won't have the spirit to cry or laugh!"

"Yes, Coach!"

"Woo-hoo, more chasing! I'll nip at you if you fall behind, so run fast!"

Natalia bowed deeply at the manic group running into the distance. "Please take good care of them, Coach Gosetsu, Roo."

While it was a heartwarming scene, Allen wasn't quite satisfied. "Hey, how come Gosetsu is 'Coach Gosetsu' now, but I'm still 'Dark Overlord'?" he said with a frown. "I wouldn't mind if you call me Professor Allen or something."

"Well, you're not the 'Professor' type, are you? The Dark Overlord is the Dark Overlord. Don't be conceited," Natalia retorted point-blank, then did a long stretch. "Anyway, let's go to the cafeteria to celebrate the win. I'm starving."

"Good idea. Remember to eat your greens," Charlotte said kindly.

"I-I do these days. Since you told me to, Char," Natalia mumbled.

Charlotte giggled. "Yes, you're a very good girl. Way to go, Natalia!"

Eluka, who had been watching over the sisters from a distance, drew closer to Allen and whispered in his ear. "Looks like they're getting along well. You could say they're close as sisters now."

"I hope that's the way it'll end up..."

"Oh, don't know what Natalia thinks about her sister? You haven't asked her yet?"

"I have to walk on eggshells when it comes to anything related to Charlotte. It'll be a bit longer before we can really open up to each other," Allen sighed. He knew that Natalia had felt real anger when he mentioned Charlotte's name in the cafeteria the other day. Watching the friendly sisters, he went on under his breath, "I'm still trying to build a trusting relationship with Natalia. I'll have to be cautious and take baby steps."

"Hunh. Even you get cautious when you're dealing with your girlfriend's little sister, I guess." Eluka smirked and smacked Allen's back repeatedly. "Anyways, the battles in the school are settling down, so Papa's satisfied now. All that's left is making Natalia happy. I'll be here to help till the end, so good luck."

"Appreciate it... By the way, what're you going to do once this is over? Will you pick up the research on Charlotte's family again?"

"Well, Papa helped me out with that too, so it's pretty much done..." Eluka glanced at the sisters. Her expression looked slightly tense. "But I can't say anything right now. I'll tell you another time, once things calm down here."

"All right..." Allen gave a heavy nod. Judging from how Eluka spoke, it couldn't be good news. If he was honest, he was itching to find out, but he had more pressing concerns at the moment. So he decided to put aside the question for the time being.

"With you two, I'm sure everything will be all right," Eluka encouraged him, cracking a goofy grin. "Once everything's resolved with Natalia, maybe I'll go back to your city. I wanna see Jill too."

"Jill? I saw him the other day," Allen said. Jill was the young man in a wheelchair who worked at the enchanted objects shop Allen and Charlotte had gone to on their first date. "He said something about wanting to 'pay me a proper visit.' What was that all about?"

"Oh, that's 'cause we're going out. Jill and me," Eluka said breezily.

"Right, I see... What?!" Allen shouted in shock. Charlotte and Natalia turned around to look.

"Aren't you coming with us, Allen?" Charlotte called to him.

"Hurry up, Dark Overlord! Let's talk strategy for the next step!"

"All right, all right... Hey, Eluka! You better give me the details later!"

"Ooh, this is new," Eluka teased. "You sound so curious. You wanna hear how your sis is doing?"

"That's totally irrelevant!"

"Huh?"

Allen grabbed her shoulders and faced her with a grave expression. “That guy’s well-versed in magic, and most importantly, he’s diligent... He’s perfect for taking over Uncle’s post! If you get together with him for good, my turn won’t come around anymore! Make every effort to keep him!”

“That’s com-*plete*-ly selfish, you know that?! Don’t you have a scrap of brotherly sentiment, like a ‘how dare he mess with my precious sister’ sorta thing? Uh, hey! Wait up! Bro!”

But Allen had said all he wanted, he lost all interest in Eluka’s reproaches and sprinted after Charlotte. “Wait for me, Charl—Char! I’m coming!”



That night, Allen and Charlotte visited Natalia’s dorm.

“Hey, Natalia. We’re here,” Allen called to her.

“Mrr...” Natalia mumbled, still asleep upon his back.

When they were having a strategy meeting at the cafeteria earlier that evening, Gosetsu and her apprentices came back from their training and joined them for dinner. The gathering quickly turned into a party. As a student cafeteria, alcohol wasn’t allowed, but the feast of juice and soda with snacks went on late into the night, until Natalia eventually fell asleep. Though Natalia already had the aura of a ruler at the tender age of seven, she still couldn’t stay up so late.

Charlotte gazed at Natalia sleeping peacefully and smiled softly. “She had a busy day today.”

“Thanks for carrying her, Dark Overlord,” said one of the dragonoids who escorted them to Natalia’s room. “I feel like my scales would hurt Boss if I carried her...”

“Don’t worry about it. Hurry up and open the door.”

“Okay, okay.” The dragonoid took out the key that Natalia had entrusted to him and unlocked the door.

Allen had to stop in his tracks and stare at the room. The room was fairly spacious, and there was a big pile of textbooks on her desk. The walls were covered with scraps of paper with her notes on magic spells and formulae.

“Hm...? She’s *really* studious...”

“Wow, she’s working so hard. Though I can’t make head nor tail of it...” Charlotte sighed in wonder, looking up at all the notes. She couldn’t tell what kind of magic Natalia was researching, but she could tell how dedicated her sister was.

Allen walked over to the bed by the window. “Come on, Natalia. You better lie down in bed—hm?”

He caught sight of something as he was putting her down: a square medium-sized trunk lay beside her pillow. It was a high-quality

case made of leather, secured with numerous locks.

Natalia reached for the trunk, mumbling something in her sleep, and squeezed her arms tight around it. Though it was hardly a comfortable thing to sleep with, she fell into deep sleep clinging to it.

"Oh, careful not to touch that trunk," the dragonoid warned them hastily. "She'd really beat us to a pulp."

"Is it something valuable...?" Charlotte asked, leaning in for a closer look.

Allen could tell at a glance that the external locks weren't the only things guarding the case. "Looks like it. It's protected by magic," Allen replied casually. "It's designed to detect living things, and if anyone tries to open it by force, it'll set off a trap... It's rather high-security. What's in it anyway?"

"Who knows? Boss doesn't tell us much about herself..." the dragonoid said, cocking his head. He glanced at the clock on the wall. "Ah, it's getting late. I'll get going—whoa!" The dragonoid let out a yelp just as he opened the door and stepped out.

"What's up?" Allen looked over to find a small figure standing in the hallway. It was the boy, Natalia's rival, gripping a crumpled piece of paper in his hand. "Oh, it's you, Chris. What is it? Challenging Natalia to another duel?"

"Sh-Shut up!" Chris turned on his heel and scampered away.

Watching him go, the dragonoid shook his head. "He really doesn't learn, does he? Well, I gotta head to my part-time job now! I'll take your leave, Boss!"

"Mrrr..."

"Right, take care," Allen said. With the dragonoid gone, the room fell silent. Allen watched Natalia deep asleep and said with a wry smile, "When she's like this, she looks just like a normal kid."

"Yes. It reminds me of the old days." Charlotte smiled affectionately. There was something wistful about her gaze. "I read her a picture book a few times, when she was very little. She used to fall asleep in the middle of the book." Charlotte paused, and looked around the room. Her eyes landed on the pile of textbooks, and a melancholy smile crossed her lips. "But...now that she can read all these difficult books, I suppose I can't read any picture books to her anymore. She really has grown up so much." She looked like a proud older sister, but also like a child who had been left behind. "Maybe...I shouldn't tell her who I really am, after all."

"What makes you say that?" Allen asked quietly.

Charlotte slowly shook her head. She only gazed at Natalia asleep. She didn't caress her little sister's head. She seemed to be trying hard not to touch her at all.

"Since we came to this island, I've had a chance to talk with

Natalia about so many things. But...she never wants to talk about her family. I think that must be the answer.” Charlotte spoke as if she was trying to persuade herself, with a sad smile. “I’m just a bad memory for her... It’s better if she forgets about me.”

“That’s so sad, Mommy. I don’t get it,” Roo whined anxiously, snuggling up to Charlotte. *“You and Natalia are so close now. But you want her to forget you...? It’s weird.”*

“We’re close because I’m Char, Allen’s assistant, not...me,” Charlotte explained.

“But you’re you, and Natalia’s Natalia. I’m gonna be sad if you two aren’t happy together.”

“Roo...” Charlotte looked pained as she stroked Roo’s head.

“Regardless,” Allen cut in, trying to sound cheerful in the somber atmosphere, “there’s no need to rush to conclusions. You can take your time, think it over.”

“That’s right, Lady Charlotte.” Gosetsu, still in her human form, drew closer to Charlotte and hugged her shoulder with a smile. “It takes time to resolve matters like this. You can watch over young Natalia with a patient heart.”

“Way to go, veteran. At times like this, your words carry more weight,” Allen remarked.

Gosetsu chuckled. “Well, I have had my share of experiences in my time. Long ago, I accidentally turned a volcanic belt in a country to the east into a devastated stretch of barren land, when I was half-asleep. However, these days, it has turned into a lush, verdant field. In other words, time heals all things.”

“The scale of your story is ridiculous...and isn’t that an infamous natural disaster that no one knows the cause of...?” Allen gave Gosetsu a withering look. She’d just casually let slip the truth behind a catastrophic disaster that was still debated by historians.

“You’re right, everyone...” Charlotte said with a giggle. “I’ll have a think about it.”

“Good. I’m here for you however long it takes,” Allen said with a leisurely nod.

But none of them could foresee that the situation would take a sharp turn so soon.

The very next day, Natalia disappeared without a trace.



The morning after the party, everyone was gathered in the usual garden. Allen stood with his arms crossed, a frown darkening his face.

“So...when you went to wake her up, she was already gone?”

“Y-Yeah, that’s what happened,” the dragonoid nodded uneasily. He was clearly worried sick, despite his inhuman features making his

species difficult to read at times. “Boss is really bad at waking up on time, you see. So one of us goes to wake her up every morning. But...this morning, she wasn’t in her room.”

“And that trunk she was so careful about—that was gone too?” Allen prompted.

“Yeah. She’s never taken it outside her room before...”

“Hmm...” Allen fell into deep thought, stroking his chin. Natalia’s followers looked at each other anxiously, but no one knew what to do. As soon as they’d discovered she was missing, they’d split into groups and searched everywhere. But when they couldn’t find a trace of her, they realized the situation was serious and came to Allen for help.

“Anything, Roo?” Allen asked.

“*Hmm. Looks like she’s hidden her scent. I can’t smell her.*” Roo had been sniffing around in the air, but she shook her head with her eyes squeezed shut.

There were other ways to look for her, but Charlotte already looked stricken with panic. “What if...she heard what we said last night?”

Human-formed Gosetsu nodded, grimacing. “I thought she was fast asleep...but I suppose it’s not impossible.”

Natalia might have run away when she realized that Charlotte was her older sister. It wasn’t entirely implausible, judging from how things stood. But Allen shook his head.

“No, that’s unlikely. There must’ve been a different reason.”

“You sound confident, Sir Allen,” Gosetsu observed. “But the question is, what shall we do about it? Either way, we must do something to find her.”

“Hmm... For now, I’ll—”

“Look! There they are!” someone shouted.

Just as Allen was about to say that he’d go look for Natalia himself, a few students ran over to them. They were all familiar faces—and they all looked even paler than Natalia’s followers.

“Oh, you’re Chris’s guys, aren’t you? We’re too busy to deal with you at the moment,” Allen said, shooing them away.

“Please! Can you help us?!” They all gathered around Allen and clung to him. Ever since Allen beat them up in the cafeteria, they had looked on him as their archenemy. But apparently today was different. As Allen stared at them suspiciously, they started babbling in a panic.

“Our leader...he made Natalia meet him in that dungeon...the part where it’s blocked off!”

“And he stole something really important from her!”

A stir ran through the group.

“Tell me everything,” Allen commanded.

At Allen’s quiet prompting, the followers calmed down just

enough to share their story. According to them, Chris had been tormented in recent months. Just as Allen had guessed, Chris had been praised throughout the school as a child prodigy, and no one could beat him—until Natalia came. But now, having lost all his duels against Natalia, his pride was in tatters, and he was cornered. These days, he was getting so desperate that he talked of using whatever means necessary to defeat her.

Last night, when Chris went to Natalia's room to challenge her to another duel, he happened to overhear the conversation about her precious trunk. He returned later, stole the case, and drew her out for a fight to the death.

"We thought he was going too far, so we tried to stop him—but he wouldn't listen. He just went off on his own..." Chris's followers murmured. "Even the teachers hardly ever go near the back of that dungeon! He's gonna get both of them killed!"

"Right..." Allen groaned. Now it was clear that Natalia hadn't run away because of Charlotte, but this still meant serious trouble. He remembered they'd seen Chris outside Natalia's door last night—it must have been then that Chris overheard them talking about the trunk. It surprised Allen that Chris was driving himself that close to the edge.

I should've noticed. It seems I was too focused on Charlotte's troubles... As he reflected on his misstep, Allen reached out and grabbed Charlotte's shoulder. She was about to run off. "And where are you going?" he asked.

"I-I'm going to go help her, of course!" Charlotte cried out urgently. She couldn't sit still at the news of her sister's danger.

But Allen remained composed and shook his head. "No. You can use a bit of magic, but you're still a beginner. It'll be too risky for you, even with me by your side."

"Shall I accompany you, then?" Gosetsu stepped forward.

"That wouldn't work either," Allen said gravely. "The beast in that dungeon is on edge this time of year. It'll only be adding fuel to the fire if another beast comes near it. I'll go alone."

"*You sure you can handle it by yourself?*" Roo asked, worried.

Allen smirked at Roo. "No sweat. I'll just pop in and teach that brat a lesson. I'll be back in no time." He leaned toward Gosetsu and quickly whispered in her ear. "*Can you let Uncle and the others know, just in case? Anything can happen.*"

Understood. With a single nod, Gosetsu vanished from the garden.

Allen peered into Charlotte's face and gave a nonchalant smile. "So, that's the way it is. Can you wait for us here?"

"I understand..." Charlotte nodded, her expression rigid. She was still blanched, but Allen could read the firm trust in her face. She

looked straight at him with determination burning in her eyes. “Please take care of Natalia, Allen!”

“Leave it to me. The rest of you, you wait here too! Look after Char for me!”

“R-Roger!” The followers, Roo, and Charlotte saw him off as he started sprinting as fast as he could. He headed straight for the familiar dungeon, one he’d often slip away to when he was still a teacher.



There are many kinds of dungeons in this world.

There were those that were centuries old. These natural lairs turned into a dungeon after a magical beast made its nest there.

The rarer kind of dungeons were the artificial ones. These could be created in all kinds of ways, but they were often made for research or training purposes. Magical beasts roamed free in these extensive dungeons like a biotope, and, to some extent, they were managed by humans. Having a large artificial dungeon was a mark of a school’s prestige: the larger the scale, the more impressive the institution.

The Athena School of Magic owned several dungeons. The most challenging one was the one in the shape of a cave, where Natalia and Chris had faced off a day before. Inside the dungeon, a rugged, rocky labyrinth continued deep underground. Though the magic fires lit here and there kept the darkness at bay, the growls of magical beasts and the noise of creatures slithering around echoed from all directions, intimidating anyone who dared venture in. And, of course, the cave was full of traps as well.

Due to its dangerous nature, students and teachers alike had to get permission from the school when they wanted to enter, and they were required to have a dungeon supervisor watching over them.

Needless to say, Allen completely ignored those rules now. He ran past the “No Entry” sign, and once he was deep in the cave, he managed to find his target in a large hollow. “Found you!” As he approached, he noticed a massive Chimaera was about to leap out from the shadows, and he quickly flung a magic fireball at it.

The fireball struck the Chimaera straight in the side of its stomach and knocked over its giant body with tremendous force. The Chimaera staggered back and scampered farther into the depths of the cave.

The Chimaera was one of the beasts that dwelled on this level of the dungeon. It was known to be a fairly formidable menace, but the boss lay elsewhere still. For now, Allen turned his attention to his real target.

“D-Dark Overlord...what are you doing here?”

A small figure crouched low in the shadow of a jutting crag stared

at Allen with wide-open eyes. It was Natalia.

She was squeezing the locked trunk tight against her chest, and Chris was right next to her, passed out. Neither of them looked hurt. Though he couldn't smell any blood in the air, Allen knelt in front of her and looked into her face.

"My questions first. Are you hurt?"

"U-Um, I sprained my ankle..." She looked at her right ankle. It was red and swollen, with scratches all over, but it didn't seem to be a serious injury. If Charlotte had been there to see her, though, she would have screamed in horror regardless. Natalia shifted her eyes to Chris with a scowl. "This idiot here tripped and hit his head...but I think he's fine."

"All right, I'll heal both of you. But before that..." Allen raised his hand in front of Natalia's eyes.

"Wh-What is it?"

There was only one thing to do to a runaway kid whose safety was ascertained.

"There!" Allen gave a light flick on her forehead.

"Eep?!" Natalia cried like a kitten and flinched. "Wh-What did you do that for?!" she barked, tears brimming in the corner of her eyes.

"That's *my* line, you airhead." Allen threw her a withering look as he cast a healing spell on her. The red swelling on her ankle rapidly shrank. "I've heard the rough story from Chris's guys. You were too reckless. You know how dangerous it is to go barging into a beast's lair when it's spawning season."

"Ack...b-but it was Chris...!" Natalia choked on her words.

"Doesn't matter. You should've told me first." Allen ruffled her hair. "Was I such an untrustworthy teacher? Char and your people are all worried sick about you."

"I'm sorry..." Natalia hung her head and murmured in a trembling voice. She squeezed her briefcase close. "But this case... I just had to get it back on my own."

"Right," Allen sighed with a wry smile. Whatever was in the case, it had to be the sort of thing that could evoke a powerful emotion from her. There was only one thing he thought it might be. "Let me guess what's inside."

"Huh?"

"It's something to do with your older sister...Charlotte. Isn't it?"

Natalia caught her breath and looked up at Allen. Her face was contorted, as if she was about to burst out crying. Hugging the trunk tight, she said hoarsely, "You...you know what happened with the Evans family, don't you?"

"Well, roughly." He shrugged. In a deliberately nonchalant tone, he went on, "Your sister committed all those crimes, and—"

“That’s not true!” Natalia yelled, her voice echoing through the cave. Big tears grew and finally fell from her eyes. “My sister can’t even hurt a fly...how could she possibly do such a thing?!” she choked out through violent sobs. “That rotten, good-for-nothing Prince must’ve made it all up to get rid of her! But the Evans family... They didn’t do anything to try to clear her name... They just cut her off completely!”

“That’s what I thought.” Allen laid a gentle hand on her head. He’d had a vague hunch about Natalia’s case, and his theory was confirmed when he set foot in Natalia’s room the night before. The numerous notes plastered all over her walls were all traces of her research on magic—in particular, spells to find lost things, or to search for missing people. “So you never hated your sister.”

“Me...hate my sister...? Don’t be ridiculous.” She furiously wiped her tears away and let out a heavy sigh. “The only people I can’t forgive are the Evans family...and myself, for being powerless to save her.”

In faltering murmurs, Natalia told Allen about her older sister. How Charlotte had always treated Natalia with genuine kindness for as long as she could remember, though they were born of different mothers. How she had noticed her family treating Charlotte like a slave. How she had done whatever she could to try to help Charlotte. How she had always felt frustrated that she couldn’t do much more than sneak her a half-spoiled fruit.

Allen listened quietly. Natalia’s voice quivered, tinged with deep regret. She kept talking between gasping sobs, spilling out everything she’d been keeping locked down tight.

“I always, always told myself, ‘I’ll save my big sister once I’m older.’ But...that was a mistake.” When her sister disappeared, and she was sent to the Athena School of Magic, she discovered her own hidden magical talent—and was thrown into despair. “If I’d stood up for her back then, I could’ve saved her a long time ago. But I made an excuse, that I was still a little kid, and I didn’t do anything. That’s why my sister ended up having to flee the country.”

“But it’s not your fault. It’s that Prince who’s at the root of all this.”

Natalia shook her head feebly. “I...I can’t say I’m completely innocent.” Had she been a powerless child, she likely wouldn’t have had to be assailed by so much guilt. But because she was born with such a gift in magic, her conviction that she should have been able to save her sister continued to torture her. “After she escaped, the family got rid of all her things. This...was the only thing that I could keep...because I kept it hidden.” Natalia squeezed the trunk so tightly that her fingertips went white. “Thanks to this, I know she’s still alive

somewhere. I can't let anyone touch this, no matter what."

"The lost-and-found spell, huh... You've run a search for her using her possession, haven't you?"

"Yes. But I haven't been able to track her down..."

"I see..."

There was a spell to search for someone's whereabouts by tracing the thoughts that lingered on their possession. But this was an extremely advanced piece of magic. If the thoughts attached to the object were old, they became difficult to trace; even if the thoughts were recent, the detection could be blocked if a great power like a dungeon lay in its direction.

Allen could tell from looking at Natalia's notes on her walls that she had gone through much trial and error. *And all because she wanted to find her sister... She must've felt like she was grasping at straws.* Allen's chest tightened at the thought.

Natalia clicked her tongue. "It's absolutely disgusting... I don't know who it is, but I'm dying to track down the insolent villain who has captured her and tear them to pieces."

"Uh..." A chill went up Allen's spine. *The insolent villain?*

"Um...what makes you think someone has captured her?"

"Whenever I try to find her, some kind of force blocks my spell. These days, I can even tell that she's really close to me. Whoever it is must have realized I'm tracing her, and they're trying to stop me. I'm sure of it."

"Right..."

"Seriously... Whoever it is, I'm definitely going to hunt them down and finish them off with my own hands. I'll never rest until I do." Natalia clenched her fists with a fierce, ominous expression.

Apparently, Allen's presence near Charlotte had been getting in the way of her spell. *So...I'm going to be torn to pieces...* He couldn't exactly deny his part in Natalia's frustration, so he could only lie down and accept his fate. He stared in the air with a distant look in his eyes.

Natalia gently stroked her briefcase. "There's someone in the way, but...I'm going to find my sister someday. Even if she hates me, or holds a grudge against me, I don't mind. I want to give this back to her...and apologize to her, face-to-face." Her pained voice resounded with firm, unwavering conviction. With tears rolling down her cheeks, she declared, "That's why...I have to get much, much stronger!"

"I get how you feel." Allen pressed a hand on her shoulder. Her wish to find her sister and apologize was genuine, and he respected it. "But don't be too reckless. If anything were to happen to you, I'm sure your sister would grieve."

"Hmph... What a corny line. What do *you* know about my sister?"

“Of course I know.” Allen wiped a tear from her face and grinned brightly. What Natalia strove for was, by pure coincidence, very similar to what Charlotte had said when she had strengthened her resolve to face her sister again a few days before. So Allen was confident that between the two of them, everything would be all right. “I’m positive. You and your sister will be able to laugh together, much more freely than in the past.”

Natalia sniffled and rolled her eyes. “Oh, please...”

“You can’t believe me? Well then, let me show you.”

“You sound as if you can bring me to her right now...” Natalia stared at Allen with a sour face. She seemed to be debating his true intentions. “Why are you so invested in me? We’ve only just met recently. We’re practically strangers.”

“Well, it’s a simple story.” *Because you’re the sister of someone who’s very dear to me.* And while that was a part of it, over the last week, Natalia had grown to be someone special to Allen in her own right. He ruffled her hair again and grinned. “You’re my student, after all. It’s a teacher’s duty to make sacrifices for their students, right?”

“Professor Allen...” Natalia murmured with a sniffle. Her usual snide remarks were gone. Instead, he could finally sense that she had real trust in him.

“All right, let’s go back. Before we go, I’ll put a healing spell on this brat—whoa!” Allen exclaimed.

Chris was already sitting up. Not only that—tears were gushing from his eyes. He was weeping so profusely that Allen almost worried it would drain away all the liquid in his body. Natalia noticed too, and the sight gave her a jolt.

“Wh-What is it, Chris?” she stuttered “Are you hurt?”

“No... If I’m hurting anywhere...it’s my conscience!”

“Uh...what?” Natalia looked at him dubiously. Chris’s face snapped up.

“I’m sorry... I woke up, and I heard everything! I-I can’t believe how stupid I’ve been...! I’m so sorry, Natalia!”

“Um, it’s all right now... What’s gotten into you all of a sudden?”

“I...I have an older sister too,” Chris confessed, his shoulders hunched low. Apparently, he was also born into a good family, and recently, his older sister had gotten engaged to a nobleman. But the marriage amounted to his family selling his sister off to pay a debt. What made it even worse was that she was in love with a childhood friend, with whom she had a secret understanding that they would be together when they were older. His sister was sending Chris letter after letter, tormented by her dilemma. Chris suffered with her. “People call me a child prodigy, but I’m still just a little kid. I don’t have a say in what my family does, and I can’t do anything for my

sister. I've been so frustrated...and I was taking it out on you, Natalia. I'm really sorry."

"Hmm...I see." Natalia nodded, then she patted Chris's shoulder and said with a smile, "Listen, Chris. It's not too late for you."

"What...?"

"What do you hope for...for your sister?"

"Th-That's obvious! I want her to be happy! That's all!"

"Good answer. Then there's only one thing to do. It doesn't matter how old you are." Natalia's soft smile broadened into a devilish grin, and she whispered into his ear. "I was just getting bored. Next month, I'll go on a holiday somewhere near your family home. Some strange incident might happen, or a kidnapper might strike, and your sister and her childhood friend might suddenly disappear...but well, things like that happen sometimes. Don't they?"

"Natalia...!" Chris brightened up and took her hands. The boy and the girl holding hands seemed to be a sweet picture of friendship on the surface, except for the ominous glint in their eyes.

Allen pressed a hand to his forehead with a groan. "Don't go brazenly scheming bad deeds..."

"What, do you have a problem with that? We're doing it to save someone," Natalia said.

"That's not the problem. You can do that to your heart's content." Allen was sure it would give them an excellent experience. But they needed adult supervision. "You can do as much as you like...but once you have a plan, show it to me. You need to plan very carefully to pull off a perfect crime. I'll look into the family of that fiancé, while I'm at it. A noble family that acts like loan sharks—they're bound to have some skeletons in their closet. The more cards we have in our hands to shut them up, the better."

"Dark Overlord...! Thank you so much!" Chris exclaimed.

"I'm one to talk, but you're surprisingly good-natured," Natalia said with a wry smile. But their heartwarming atmosphere was interrupted by a tremendous crash.

BOOOOOM!

The thunderous noise shook the entire cave. Heavy, continuous thuds resounded in the hollow, and the noise was clearly coming closer. Natalia and Chris stole a glance from behind the rock and let out a gasp. At their reaction, Allen checked the source of the sound too.

"Ah, thought it must be that one."

A colossal red dragon was slowly advancing toward them. Its body was round like a ball, and sparks of flame were flickering out of its mouth. The children looked up at the towering beast and trembled, the color draining from their faces.

“I-It’s the dungeon boss...the Salamander...!” Chris stammered.

“No wonder it rules the dungeon... It’s at least twice the size of the average Salamander,” Natalia remarked.

The Salamander, otherwise known as the Fire Dragon, was infamous as an especially ferocious dragon species. It breathed fire that burned at up to several thousand degrees, and its thick armor of fat and scales was impervious to most attacks.

On top of that, it was spawning season. Though its face looked groggy, its eyes were glittering with a fierce light. It would judge any creature outside of its species as an enemy and turn them into a handful of ash in an instant.

Even Natalia and Chris quailed at the Salamander, a beast that they had never confronted before. They looked up at Allen urgently.

“Wh-What do we do, Professor Allen? We learned about Salamanders in class, but... Should we make a united front and attack all at once?” Natalia asked.

“I-I’ll do anything! I can be a decoy! Just tell me what to do!” Chris added earnestly.

“Shush, calm down.” Allen pulled them in and pushed them back in the shadow of the crag. “There’s one easy way to deal with this beast. Sit still and watch.”

“W-Wait, Professor Allen?!” Shrugging Natalia off, Allen leaped out into the open.

The Salamander stopped in its tracks at his sudden appearance. It looked at Allen for a moment, but its body soon began to glow blazing red. The ominous glow was the Salamander’s way of threatening the enemy. When Allen didn’t back down, the Salamander kicked the ground and charged at him. If it stormed into him, it would surely be fatal, but Allen stayed put and shouted at the top of his lungs, “Pooch! Sit!”

“Grrr...rawr!!!”

WHUMP!

The Salamander kept dashing at Allen, sending a thunderous, shaking rumble through the whole dungeon. The cave was filled with a cloud of dust, and Natalia jumped out from her hiding place.

“P-Professor Allen! Uh...Professor?” Natalia froze, her mouth hanging open. Chris, peeking out from behind the rock, wore the same expression. Much to their surprise, they saw that neither the Salamander nor Allen had attacked each other.

“Grrgrrrrrr~♪” the Salamander purred, leaning on Allen.

“Ugh, I told you to *sit*, dammit!” Allen scolded the creature as he tried to push it back. But it was as immovable as a giant boulder. It seemed to think Allen was petting it, and it purred even more happily. Its threatening glow had vanished, and it was obviously relaxed.

“Oh, what’s this?” A mellow voice echoed in the cave. Liselotte, Allen’s mother, stepped out from the depths of the cave wearing a tracksuit, with a large bucket in her hand. “Tsk tsk, children. Students aren’t allowed back here right now. As the professor of magical beasts, I’m the only one who can come in, you know.”

“I-I’m sorry, Professor Liz,” Natalia said. “It’s a long story...but um, the Salamander’s acting weird...”

“Oh my, oh my.” Liselotte put a hand to her cheek and smiled at her son, who looked like he might be crushed to death any minute. “Dear little Pooch remembers your face, Allen. Well, you did hatch and raise little Pooch as your own, after all.”

“Though it looks like Pooch still won’t follow my commands...”

“Gawr!” The Salamander, whom Allen had hatched with the help of his mother when he was little, barked proudly at his remark.

Allen had always been bad at training creatures and the like, and he had spoiled this Salamander too—and this was the result. “I suppose I haven’t changed much since then,” Allen mumbled to himself, still stuck under the giant dragon.



When Allen stepped out of the dungeon, the two children in tow, everyone was gathered at the entrance: Charlotte, Gosetsu, Roo, Natalia’s followers, Chris’s followers, and even Harvey, Allen’s father. Everyone looked tense and uneasy, but as soon as they saw the three of them emerging from the cave, they sighed a collective sigh of relief.

“Natalia...!” Charlotte dashed forward. With a pale face, she knelt in front of Natalia and caressed her shoulders and cheeks as if to make sure she was really there. “Are you all right?! Are you hurt?!”

“U-Um, I’m okay...” Natalia answered, widening her eyes a little. She seemed taken aback to see Char so concerned.

Chris walked up to Harvey and gave him a deep bow. “I’m so sorry, Headmaster. It’s all my fault. I’m ready to receive any kind of punishment!”

“Hmm, it seems you’ve matured as well,” Harvey observed with a smile. Chris’s followers were taken aback by their leader’s sudden change, but they were all relieved to see he was safe.

Charlotte was still blanched. She even broke down in tears. “I’m so glad...you’re safe... If anything happened to you, I...I...”

“I’m sorry, Char. I didn’t mean to upset you...but really, I’m all right now.” Natalia fretted, trying to soothe her. It was truly a heartwarming scene.

After a few moments of this, Allen walked over to Charlotte and put a light hand on her shoulder. “That’s right. Calm down a little, Charlotte.”

“B-But Allen—oh!” Charlotte froze midsentence.

“Charlotte...?” Natalia knitted her brows dubiously.

Allen smirked at their contrasting reactions. “Here. It’s time for the emotional reunion.” He swiftly removed Charlotte’s magic glasses.

“What—!”

Both sisters caught their breath at once as the deception magic was dispelled. Natalia’s older sister—the sister whom she’d been looking for all this time, racked with guilt and regret—had suddenly appeared before her own eyes.

Murmurs rose among the followers too. Gosetsu and Roo showed their surprise on their faces, but only looked on quietly.

Natalia stood stock-still, forgetting to breathe. Charlotte blanched even more and edged away from her in a panic.

“A-Allen?! What are you doing?” Charlotte asked.

“Don’t worry. Go on.” Allen pulled her hand and drew her toward her sister again. He patted her tense shoulders as he whispered in her ear. “If you tell her how you feel now, your words will reach her. I promise you that... Be brave.”

“Allen...” Charlotte looked timidly from Allen to Natalia, then braced herself. By her own will, she took a step forward and looked into her sister’s eyes. “U-Um...Natalia. I...” She clenched her fists and went on, her eyes locked on her sister, “I’m sure I’ve caused a lot of trouble for you. So for a long time...I’ve wanted to apologize to you—”

“Are you really...?” Natalia cut her off and clung to Charlotte’s arms. She looked into Charlotte’s face with wild eyes and cried out in a trembling voice, “Are you...really my sister?! Isn’t this just Professor Allen’s illusion?”

“You could certainly see through it if it was,” Allen said with a gentle smile. “If you still have doubts, you can ask her something only your sister would know. An illusion of my creation wouldn’t be able to answer that.”

“Th-Then...um, the picture book she used to read to me often when I was little... What was it about...?” Natalia asked.

“Um, you mean the one about the zoo,” Charlotte answered slowly, with a sad smile.

Natalia’s shoulders shook as if she was hit by lightning.

“It was about children going to the zoo,” Charlotte continued. “My mother used to read it to me when she was still alive...so I brought it with me to the Duke’s Estate, but at some point, it disappeared. I assumed they threw it away... N-Natalia?”

Natalia started weeping, crumpling to the ground. She was too overwhelmed to cover her face or wipe her tears away. With fumbling fingers, she struggled to open the locks of the trunk at her feet. Inside the case was something wrapped round and round in a soft, velvety

cloth. She hastily unwrapped it. "H-Here...look at this...!"

"That's...!"

The last fold of the cloth dropped, revealing a faded picture book, with a cartoonish illustration of children playing with magical beasts on the cover. The cover and the fore edge had some wear and tear, but otherwise, there was no clear damage. It was obvious that Natalia had been treating it with great care. Natalia timidly held it out to Charlotte.

"I found it when they were throwing it out, and I kept it hidden... I knew it was a precious book for you, with memories of your mother..." Natalia confessed as she choked on her sobs, screwing up her face. "I...I wanted to give it back to you for so long...! And I just...wished...you could read it to me...just one more time!"

"Oh, Natalia!" Charlotte pulled her sister into a tight embrace, along with the picture book. Round-eyed, Natalia buried her face in Charlotte's chest. She threw her arms around her older sister.

"I'm so sorry, dear sister! I'm sorry I couldn't help you...! I'm sorry!" Natalia burst out.

"Me too, Natalia...I'm sorry I left you all alone!"

The sisters hugged each other close, weeping together. Allen laid a gentle hand on both their shoulders, watching over them quietly.

"So happy for you, Natalia...!" Chris murmured, his eyes welling up.

"Not sure what's happening...but it's so touching." Though confused, Chris's gang was also moved to tears by the mood of the moment.

"What a lovely grand finale," Harvey remarked with a tender smile.

Eventually, Natalia stopped crying and lifted her tear-stained face. "But how did you get here, dear sister...?"

"Well..." When Charlotte explained what happened, Natalia looked at Allen with wide eyes.

"I-Is that really true, Professor Allen? You...you saved my sister?"

"It's not such a big deal," Allen said with a shrug.

Natalia stared at him open-mouthed for some moments, then she turned to face him and gave a deep bow. "Thank you so much, Professor Allen. You've really...done so much for us."

"Well...weren't you going to get whoever's confining your sister and tear them into pieces?" Allen asked.

"Of course not anymore. Just from looking at my sister, I can tell how much you've protected her and how well you've treated her. You were just waiting until it was safe for us to see each other, weren't you?" Natalia shook her head with a wry smile, then looked up at him with a soft smile. "I'm glad I met you. Thank you for everything."

“Natalia...” Unusually for him, Allen was struck speechless by her honest, straightforward words and smile. He was truly glad that the sisters could finally meet again. He was savoring the moment...but it was short-lived.

“Oh, that’s right.” Charlotte wiped her eyes as something suddenly occurred to her. “I have to introduce Allen to you properly.” She gestured to Allen with a bright smile and uttered a few simple words that might as well have been his death sentence. “This is Allen. He’s my rescuer and...now he’s someone special to me.”

All emotion vanished from Natalia’s face in an instant. “What?”

Allen’s heart shrank at the sight of her completely vacant expression. *Oh. This is bad. This is really, really bad.* He felt the swift approach of death and tried to cut off Charlotte’s words. “Ch-Charlotte. Why don’t you leave that talk for another time—”

“No, let’s hear it,” Natalia interrupted, her face still frighteningly blank. “What did you mean by that, dear sister?”

“Oh...um, well...things happened, and...” Charlotte blushed and looked down shyly.

She’s adorable. I can’t believe how cute she is, Allen thought, but he didn’t have the chance to enjoy her adorableness for long. What Charlotte said next became the opening shot of the battle.

“Actually...I’m in a relationship with Allen now—”

“HOW DARE YOU!!!”

BAAAANG!

“Whoa?!”

Natalia flung herself at Allen with demonic fury and dealt out an attack spell at the same time. She brandished a sword and a spear woven out of magic, one in each hand. The glow of magic fortifying her physical strength radiated from her body as she swung her weapons at Allen relentlessly. Her thrusts were as fast as the speed of sound, but Allen managed to block each of her attacks by a hair’s breadth, guarding himself with a magic barrier that he formed in a split second. Cold sweat trailed down his back as he grumbled under his breath with a distant look in his eyes. “I knew this was coming...”

Natalia loved her older sister more than anyone else. In other words, she had an extreme case of sister complex. It was painfully obvious how a girl like that would react to the announcement that he was going out with her sister. What was more, their particular situation made it seem like he’d taken in Charlotte with ulterior motives. Perhaps because of that, Natalia’s hostility was about thirty times more ferocious than he’d expected.

From the other side of the barrier, Natalia shouted in a thunderous roar. “You scum... What do you think you’re doing to my dear sister, huh?! Is that what you were after when you took her in?!”

You're filthy! Pervert! Dirtbag!!!"

"Wait, just wait a second, you'll see if you listen! Charlotte and I have an extremely pure relationship, if I do say so myself, and—"

"Enough talk! I'm going to kill you right here and now! Tear you into pieces? That's way too soft! I'll destroy every inch of you, down to the last scrap of flesh!"

"Crap...! Fine, I have no choice but to take you on!" Allen replied, standing his ground. "I'll defeat you...and make you approve of our relationship!"

"Bring it on, you rotten, filthy wizard! I won't hand over my dear sister to a dirty rat like you!!!"

The two charged at each other, and the tremendous clashes of swords and explosions reverberated through the air.

"Wh...What happened?! A-Allen?! Natalia?! Why?! Please! Someone stop them!" Charlotte panicked, but the rest looked at each other with grave faces.

After a pause, Harvey spoke up with a half smile. "Well...I think we should let it run its course—they better get it all out of their system."

"Agreed," Gosetsu said. "Come, Lady Charlotte. Let us all go and have something nice to eat."

"Aha, you know what you're talking about, Gosetsu," Harvey added. "How about we all go to my favorite restaurant? Their seafood is superb. I'll call over Lizzie and Eluka, and we'll have a family night out."

"Woo-hoo! *I feel like some good fish,*" Roo joined in.

"Oh, u-um...should we really leave them like that?! Are you sure?!" Charlotte said, still flustered.

"What do we do...?" Natalia's gang started their own discussion with an uneasy laugh. "We better keep out of it, or we'll be in deep trouble... Let's go hang out at the cafeteria. Wanna come with us, you guys?" They turned to Chris and his followers.

"Fine. I'll treat you to make up for the mess I've caused," Chris assented.

None of them knew what else to do, so the group simply left the two to their mortal combat.

The war between the younger sister and the suitor raged on until Natalia got sleepy that night and snuggled into bed with Charlotte, then recommenced after breakfast...and so they were mired in battle for a total of three days, leaving behind yet another legend to be passed down at the Athena School of Magic.

Extra Chapter: A Young Warrior Sets Out to Defeat the Dark Lord

One day, young Henry made up his mind. He must defeat that Dark Lord of cunning atrocities.

“All right! I’m ready!”

In a forest on the outskirts of the city, he thrust his stick high in the air. He’d picked out this weapon very carefully in the woods; it was perfect in thickness and length. And with a bright red scarf that he sneaked out of a drawer at home wrapped around his neck, he was now a true warrior.

Henry called out to his comrades in high spirits. “You ready to take him on? Flatt! Karim!”

“Y-Yeah...”

“Sure...”

Only feeble answers came from his friends. In contrast to Henry, who was fired up, his best friends stood by, their arms limp at their sides, with reluctance written over their faces. They’d brought weapons just as Henry had told them to, like a slingshot and a small kid’s baseball bat, but their hearts didn’t seem to be in it.

Henry glowered at his unreliable friends. “What’s wrong, you guys? Are you scared now? We’re gonna take down the Dark Lord, remember?” he said, pointing toward the mansion that stood beyond the woods. That was their target: the evil Dark Lord’s fortress. The squad was driven by a single mission. “We have to overthrow him...and we’ll rescue that princess!”

It was three days ago that Henry had met the princess. The three of them had been playing in the forest when Henry tripped and hurt his leg. Just as he was trudging back home, his friends holding him up, the princess had walked by.

The princess—she had to be a princess, with her flowing golden hair, shining beauty, and a bearing full of grace—introduced herself as Charlotte, and offered a vial of potion to him straightaway to heal his wound.

“You’re welcome to come along to the mansion sometime, if you like,” she said with a soft smile, pointing at the mansion. It was the mansion where the “Dark Lord” Allen lived—everyone in town knew he was a weirdo wizard. With her gesture, the boys had realized that she was living with him.

Henry thrust his fist at the sky. "The Dark Lord must've snatched her away from a castle somewhere! We've got to save her!"

"But why would he let her walk around freely like that, if he kidnapped her?" Flatt asked doubtfully.

"U-Umm, well...maybe he's making her stand outside like a guard?"

"He's the Dark Lord. Wouldn't he have minions or something?" Karim pointed out.

"Yeah. Why would he use her like that when he's just stolen her away?" Flatt added. Neither one looked convinced. They exchanged glances and mumbled to each other.

"Besides, that wizard might actually be a pretty good guy. He saved our cat the other day."

"He comes to our cake shop all the time too. He even fixed our oven for free. My dad was really happy."

"Those must be part of his tricks! Don't fall for it!" Henry stomped his feet.

Henry's family, too, owned a shop of stationery and small trinkets. Since the Dark Lord tended to be generous with his purchases, his mother was especially fond of the wizard. These days, it was her habit to remind Henry: "You can go play in the forest, but make sure you don't give the Dark Lord any trouble, you hear?"

The people of the town, who had once only looked at the wizard with detached curiosity, now had favorable opinions of him. But Henry knew better. The Dark Lord couldn't fool *him*. "Just look at his face! There's no way a guy who looks so evil would be up to any good!"

"Well, you've got a point... He does look shady."

"And he totally acts like it too."

The two boys who'd originally sided with the Dark Lord nodded in agreement this time.

Pleased that he was getting his way, Henry eagerly said, "Right?! That's why we have to take him down! It's our chance to be heroes!"

"But how? I heard he's crazy strong."

"Well, we just gotta take him by surprise and whack him hard."

"Hmm...that doesn't sound very heroic."

"So basically, you have zero plan. I don't know if this is gonna work."

"Of course it will! Justice always wins!"

And so, Henry strode on toward the Dark Lord's mansion, the other two trailing reluctantly behind him. They headed for the expansive garden at the back of the house instead of the front door. They would sneak into the mansion unnoticed and strike the Dark Lord when he least expected it. That was their perfect plan—but they

were quickly met with an obstacle.

“What’s that...?” Henry peered out from behind the bushes and cocked his head in puzzlement.

“No idea...” Flatt was puzzled too.

On the other side of the lawn, just across from them, was the back door to the mansion. And right in front of it was a strange creature napping in the sun. If they had to describe it simply, they’d call it a big brown rat. The beast, about as big as the boys, was sleeping comfortably on a straw bed.

They had expected a watchdog or something like that, but they hadn’t expected to encounter a giant rat. Henry’s determination was a little shaken. The rat’s face looked so peaceful and dull that there was not a hint of danger in the air.

But as soon as he caught sight of the rat, Karim went pale and staggered back. “N-No, that can’t be...an Infernal Capybara?!”

“You know what it is, Karim?”

“I’ve read about it in a book! They’re really, really powerful. And if you make them mad, you’re screwed!”

“N-No way. That sleepy-faced rat? It can’t be *that* strong.” Henry was doubtful.

But Karim’s fear was genuine. “There are stories, like one of them destroyed an entire country all by itself...!”

Flatt’s face stiffened too, and he tugged at Henry’s sleeve. “C-Come on, let’s call it off. We don’t have a chance against a beast like that.”

“So what? We can’t give up now!”

“Henry! Wait!”

Henry jumped out of the bushes and sprinted toward the Infernal Capybara. “Rahhhh!” He swung the stick back and thrust it down at the beast’s forehead, aiming for the old cross-shaped scar. Henry thought he hit the mark—but the creature vanished in the split second before the stick made contact. He immediately lost his balance. “Oww...wh-what the heck?! M-My weapon’s gone...!”

His hand was empty. He heard Flatt and Karim shouting from a distance, and when he spun around, he found the beast standing right behind him.

“Eep?!”

The Infernal Capybara held Henry’s stick in its front paw, and it gave the stick a light flick in the air.

BOOOM!

“Wha?!” Henry had dropped to the ground just in time.

A tremendous shock wave blasted from the stick, and a tall tree in the garden was blown down, scattering clouds of dust. Henry could only stare, thunderstruck.

“Capy? Capypy...” The giant rat cocked its head, then gave a slight bow to Henry and his friends. If they could understand the language of magical beasts, they would’ve heard it as an apology. *“Oops. I was still half asleep and struck back on impulse. My apologies, little guests.”*

But of course, the boys had no such skill, so they fled pell-mell with a panicked shriek.

A thick forest stretched out just behind the Dark Lord’s mansion. But for them, it was a familiar playground. It should’ve been easy for them to cut across it to make a beeline for the city. But when it rains, it pours. Another creature emerged before them, blocking their way.

“Grrrr...”

“Eek! Now a wolf?!”

A large wolf with silver fur leaped out from the bushes. A low growl came from its throat, and its sharp fangs were gleaming. Any grown-up—let alone unarmed little boys—would be easily slashed to death.

The three of them could only huddle together in fear and back away.

Behind them, the Infernal Capybara’s footsteps were slowly drawing closer.

“Wh-What kind of minions does he have?! I told you we didn’t stand a chance against the Dark Lord!” Karim cried out, almost in tears.

Henry was overcome by regret too. His knees were shaking violently, and he had to fight to keep the tears back. But still, he was still determined. “Even if we don’t stand a chance...” He picked up a thin branch from the ground and thrust it forward at the wolf. “I won’t give up! ’Cause if we give up on her...what will happen to the princess?!”

The princess must be suffering every day as a prisoner of the Dark Lord. It was up to Henry and his friends to save her. His words struck Flatt and Karim, and after a moment of hesitation, they also took up their own weapons. They exchanged looks and confronted the wolf head-on.

“Let’s do it!” Henry shouted.

“Gawrr.” The wolf kicked the ground, and the boys darted forward to meet its attack.

“Hey, what do you think you’re doing?”

A hand stretched out from the side and grabbed the wolf by the back of its neck. The wolf let out a little squeal. The boys’ target himself, the Dark Lord, had appeared out of nowhere. He scolded the wolf with a little thump.

“Gawrrr. Gawr!” the wolf barked, throwing a resentful look at the Dark Lord.

“Huh? *I was just giving them some fun?*” You might think it’s just play, but for a human child, their life could be at risk. Just think about the size difference, for one thing,” the Dark Lord chided.

The boys could only stare at them with their mouths hanging open.

“Wh-Why did the Dark Lord help us...?” Henry murmured.

“Who knows...?” Flatt whispered back.

“Allen? Did something happen?” The princess caught up to him.

“Hey, the princess!” Henry exclaimed.

“Huh? Princess?” Allen cocked his head, looking between her and the boys in puzzlement. “You know them, Charlotte?”

The princess looked at the boys for a moment before recognition crossed her face. “Yes. We met in the woods the other day. One was hurt, so I gave him some of your magic medicine.”

“You’re always doing strangers a favor wherever you go, aren’t you?”

“They’re not strangers, though. I’ve seen them playing near the mansion many times!”

“This is how you get weirdos attached to you, you know...” Allen smiled helplessly at her.

The smile made his face look a little less malicious than usual. And there was something cheerful about his voice too. He didn’t look like the evil Dark Lord who was keeping the princess under confinement. The boys were bewildered.

“Don’t you think...they’re like friends?” Karim whispered.

“Yeah...” Henry murmured.

“Maybe he didn’t kidnap her, after all...” Flatt mumbled.

Then the Infernal Capybara joined them and headbutted the Dark Lord from the side. “Capy, capyyy,” it squeaked as if in protest at something.

“Hm? *By weirdo, are you referring to me? I should like to think I’m a more well-rounded creature than you are?*” You better look in the mirror before you talk.”

“Gawr, grr!”

“What do you mean, *I’m a lot more grown up than you?*” Don’t be cheeky!” The Dark Lord made a racket as the wolf nipped at him.

The boys had assumed the creatures were his minions, but the beasts didn’t seem to be particularly respectful to him.

Is he really the bad guy...? The thought flashed across Henry’s mind. He sidled over to the princess, who was looking on at the others fondly, and stealthily tugged at her sleeve. “Um, princess?”

“P-princess? Do you mean me?”

“Yeah. Why are you living with the Dark Lord?”

“Oh, um...” She thought about it a little, then gave him a faint

smile. “I don’t have anywhere else to go. So Allen is letting me stay at his mansion.”

“So that’s how it is...”

“But now...”

Charlotte’s voice trailed off, and Henry looked up at her, confused.

The princess smiled shyly and whispered, “I’m here by his side because I want to be with him.”

“Does that mean...you *like* the Dark Lord?”

She gave a little nod and giggled. She wore a happy, radiant kind of expression that no imprisoned princess would have on her face. Though Henry couldn’t tell why, something pricked at his heart to see her like that.

The Dark Lord cleared his throat, pressing down the two beasts. “Anyway, we don’t have to stand here chatting... Why don’t you kids come into the house? Let me offer you some tea to make up for them scaring you.”

“Ooh, a tea party with guests! Sounds lovely!” Charlotte chimed in.

“A tea party...should we go?” Flatt nudged the other two.

“If we’re invited, I guess we could? Um, I hope the wolf and Infernal Capybara won’t bite us or anything?” Karim asked.

“It’s all right. They’re both very sweet!” Charlotte assured them.

Flatt and Karim were already letting their guard down, getting excited about the party. Henry stood a little to the side in silence. The pain in his heart was only growing deeper.

Years later, Henry would realize that this pain was his first ever experience of a broken heart—but even that far down the line, it was said that the Dark Lord and the princess were still living happily together in the very same mansion.

Afterword

Thank you very much for spending time with *I'm Giving the Disgraced Noble Lady I Rescued a Crash Course in Naughtiness* (or *Crash Course in Naughtiness* for short), volume two.

Once again, we were able to publish this second volume thanks to the efforts of many people.

There's a lot packed into this book—Allen and Charlotte's relationship progresses, Charlotte makes the decision to move forward in the future, and at times, the strange Capybara that features prominently on the cover steals the show (?). All in all, it has the hallmarks of the hurly-burly, heartwarming rom-com that it's meant to be.

The Infernal Capybara, Gosetsu, was initially supposed to appear only in the zoo chapter of the first volume, but when it was serialized online, I received many comments from unsettled readers, like "What's the deal with this capybara? LOL"—and as a result, she became a regular character.

Even as the author, I myself don't know what the deal is with this rat, but when I saw the artist Sakura Miwabe's illustration of Gosetsu, I was so glad I brought her back into the story. The Capybara and Roo the Fenrir are now lined up on the cover, enticing readers with their fluffy-chonky looks.

And this volume has not only a lot of fluffiness, but also rom-com. Since I love writing flirty, lovey-dovey scenes, I remember having a lot of fun with them here. After Allen realized his own feelings, I thought about making him worry over the question a little bit longer before his confession, but I had the feeling that this guy would go straight to the point, so it ended up going the way it did.

Another highlight for this volume is the appearance of Natalia, Charlotte's little sister. There was a glimpse of her in the first volume, but I finally had the chance to bring her to the forefront this time.

Miwabe-sensei has drawn a mini version of her on the back cover, so that's a must-see. I hope you enjoy finding out what she's like when you read the story. I sure do get a kick out of writing her character.

Now, I'm coming to the end of the allotted pages, so I'll give all my acknowledgments:

My dear editor, K. Sakura Miwabe-sensei, who did the illustrations. Ichiho Katsura-sensei, who is turning this story into a

manga series. And last but not least, all of my readers. Thank you so much for your support.

Thanks to you, everyone, we've been able to bring out this second volume. If you found even a little bit of amusement here, I would be very happy.

Finally, the first volume of the manga is coming out at the same time as this volume. The manga artist, Ichiho Katsura-sensei, has done such a thorough job of reimagining the story as a comic, fleshing it out with detailed gestures and expressions that weren't in the original. Allen's ridiculousness knows no bounds, and the sky's the limit for Charlotte's cuteness!

I hope you'll pick up the manga version too.

Well then, I will work hard so that I can see you again someday.

Greetings from Same.





Bonus Short Story

Naughty Battle of Gentlemen

Everyone has a battle in which they can never concede. For Allen, it was a battle he had to win even if that meant risking his life.

“Lady Charlotte. I have procured the goods that you requested,” said Gosetsu. She had just returned home and was toting a large paper bag. She wasn’t in her usual Infernal Capybara shape; she’d transformed herself into a beautiful woman. Since the art of transformation did use up some of her energy, she spent most of her time as a beast, but when she had to go shopping or run some such errand, she slipped into her human guise and carried out her task. She certainly was a useful magical beast to have around.

Charlotte rose from her chair to greet her. “Oh! Thank you so much, Gosetsu.” Her face creased into an apologetic smile as she took the paper bag from Gosetsu. “I’m sorry to make you go on an errand...”

“Tis no matter, Lady Charlotte, you had to entertain your visitor. I am happy to be of service to you.”

“Welcome back, Gosetsu,” Eluka said with a wave. She and Charlotte had been having tea while Gosetsu dealt with the shopping.

“But you did the laundry and cleaned the house too... I’m so sorry to trouble you.”

“It’s no trouble for me,” Gosetsu said with a hearty laugh. She reverently knelt in front of Charlotte and took her hand. Gosetsu’s eyes were shining, lit up by her spirit of pure loyalty. “I assure you, to be of use to my Lady brings supreme happiness to your Gosetsu. But if I may request a reward for my service...could you please pet my head?”

“L-Like this?”

“Mm-hmm. Oh Lady Charlotte, you have the most wonderful petting technique.”

A beautiful woman with a rapturous smile on her face, and a young girl hesitantly stroking the woman’s head. The scene gave off a somewhat naughty air.

Allen looked sideways at them and humphed. “She’s a freeloader after all—errands are the least she can do to earn her keep. In fact, she should be doing more than that.”

“Oho, that’s a sharp blow. Well then, Lady Charlotte, I will

continue to serve you as your faithful servant with all my heart and soul. Please allow me to stay by your side.”

“S-Sure...but you don’t have to be so formal, Gosetsu. You can be with me as a friend, you know...”

“What a preposterous thought. It is my *raison d’être* to serve a superb master. I implore you to grant this old servant the bliss of living in faith and loyalty.” With that, Gosetsu softly kissed Charlotte’s hand.

“Umm...” Charlotte looked on, unsure what to do.

Allen frowned at Gosetsu’s grandiose overtures. He had allowed her to stay close to Charlotte because, despite speaking and behaving like a wizened, grandfatherly warrior, she turned out to be a female, but he had to draw the line somewhere. He was about to lodge a complaint when Eluka’s remark made him freeze.

“You know, Gosetsu is so much more of a gentleman than you are, bro.”

Gentleman. The word pushed everything he was going to say out of his head. “What...?”

The Infernal Capybara, the one who’d stirred up a huge mess, and eventually moved into Allen’s mansion as a freeloader. *That* beast, a gentleman? However he looked at it, it was absurd.

But Gosetsu herself let out a small chuckle. “Me, more gentlemanly than Sir Allen? You amuse me, Miss Eluka.” She shrugged off the idea with a flourish. Her exaggerated gestures enhanced her glamorous appearance. “I, for one, am appalled even to be compared with Sir Allen,” she sighed. “If such a man as him, utterly lacking in delicacy, is considered a gentleman, we would have to start calling all kinds of creatures in this world saints and sages.”

“Oh, my bad, Gosetsu,” Eluka said. “You’re so right, what was I thinking?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?!” Allen objected, raising his voice.

Charlotte giggled. “It’s true, Gosetsu is courteous like a real gentleman. She often carries things for me when we go out to town too.”

“But I do too!!!” Allen grabbed her hand. He just couldn’t let this pass. His dignity as a human being—or rather, as her boyfriend—was on the line. “Come on, Charlotte,” he appealed desperately, “*you* think I’m more of a gentleman than Gosetsu...don’t you?”

“Oh? Well, you’re both so kind to me... I can’t say who’s better, either way.”

“But you can! You’re *my* girlfriend!” Allen was devastated by Charlotte’s utter honesty, even in a situation like this. *Does that mean...my gentlemanliness is on par with Gosetsu’s in Charlotte’s eyes?!*

He shuddered in disbelief.

"If you ask me, I think Gosetsu definitely wins," Eluka said casually, munching on some sweets. "She's super attentive down to the tiniest detail, and the way she talks is so calm and gentle too. She hasn't lived this long by luck, that's for sure."

"How the hell is this beast a gentleman?!" Allen barked. "She even kidnapped Charlotte once! She's an abductor!"

Eluka waved him off. "Well, that's just the nature of Infernal Capybaras. Even taking that into account, I think she's still more considerate than you, bro."

"Ugh...you don't mince words, do you? Then, what about Roo?" Allen turned to the Fenrir pup. "What do *you* think?! You live here too, so you *must* know what this dirty rat is really like!"

"Oh, me? Hmm, let me think." Roo had been lazing around near the window, basking in the sun, but at Allen's question, she slowly rose. She pondered it for a little while, then cast Allen a withering look. "*I don't know much about gentlemen or whatever. But going by instinct, I do know that you're definitely not one, Allen.*"

"Roo! If you side with me now, I'll give you a big steak for dinner tonight!"

"*Your habit of trying to get your way willy-nilly, by force—that doesn't seem very gentlemanly to me.*"

"Ack...!" Allen clammed up.

"Kids can be so perceptive," Eluka said.

"No room for rebuttal, it seems," Gosetsu added.

Apparently, no one was on his side. The only one who could save him was Charlotte, but she couldn't seem to decide one way or the other. In short, he was cornered by enemies. But Allen scoffed boldly. "Fine... Why don't we settle the question then?"

"Hm...?" Gosetsu narrowed her eyes at him.

Pointing straight at her face, Allen declared war. "We'll both escort Charlotte on an excursion to the city! Then she can judge which one of us is a bigger gentleman!"

"Interesting! Challenge accepted!" Gosetsu said.

"Um, I have to be the judge?!" Charlotte cried out, round-eyed. She could only watch as the pair got fired up, sparks flying between them.



After a thorough discussion, the duel was set for the next day.

Allen and Gosetsu would accompany Charlotte to the city and escort her around as true gentlemen would. And at the end of the day, Charlotte would decide who was more gentlemanly. It was an elementary and practical plan.

Charlotte paused at the entrance to the city and smiled at Allen with a blush. "Hee hee, it's nice to be out with you."

"Y-Yeah. It sure is." Though he'd called it a duel, it was, in effect, a date. In high spirits, Allen almost forgot his mission, but he disciplined himself with an iron will. A life-or-death battle was about to commence. *When it comes down to it, even I can be a real gentleman! I'll show her how considerate I can be!*

He cleared his throat and looked at Charlotte with renewed determination. "You're so dressed up today. Your hair looks different," he said with a grin.

Charlotte's face brightened up. "Oh, you noticed."

Normally, she kept her hair down, with the hair ornament pinned on the side, but today, it was in a French braid. The arrangement, as delicate and elaborate as a confection, must have taken a lot of time and effort.

Noticing subtle changes like this was sure to rack up gentleman points. Allen felt pleased with himself, but what Charlotte said quickly sobered him.

"Gosetsu did it for me."

"What?" Allen croaked.

"I am delighted you like it," a respectful voice resounded behind them.

They turned to find Gosetsu in her human shape again. On top of her usual sultry appearance, her outfit made her positively dazzling. She donned not a gorgeous dress, but a sharp, stylish suit that was white from top to bottom. If anyone else had worn it, they would have looked ridiculous, but Gosetsu wore it perfectly with her voluptuous figure. The fact that she had a few top buttons undone—perhaps because it was so tight in that area—added an effortlessly debonair touch.

To top it all off, she had her hair slicked down and back. She was a perfect specimen of a beautiful woman in masculine dress, who would look stunning anywhere she went. The women who caught sight of her all let out squeals of delight.

But Gosetsu had no eyes for anyone around her: only Charlotte. She took a strand of Charlotte's braids and lifted it to her lips. In her outfit, she exuded a royal aura, and it wouldn't have been far-fetched to assume her a prince of a powerful kingdom.

"It's been a long time since I braided anyone's hair, but it suits you very well, Lady Charlotte. You are as lovely as ever."

"U-Um, it's all because you're so good at it, Gosetsu. You look so special today... I've never seen you dressed like this."

"Yes, I thought I needed a worthy guise to escort you, Lady Charlotte. Does it look strange on me?"

“Not at all! You look amazing!”

“Oh ho ho, your praise is my greatest honor. I am looking forward to entertaining you today.”

“Me too. I can’t wait.” Charlotte smiled broadly, her cheeks turning a little pink.

Gosetsu smiled warmly at her Lady—then threw a sneer at Allen.

So, the duel had already begun before I even realized...! Allen gnashed his teeth. He couldn’t believe he’d let Gosetsu make such an effective attack as an opening move. His opponent was clearly going for the kill. But he would never back down. He mustered all his resolve and glowered at Gosetsu. “Gosetsu! I won’t hold back today. I’ll bring you to your knees, fair and square!”

Gosetsu seemed at ease, taking on his challenge with absolute confidence. “Hmph, don’t make me laugh. You are no better than a babbling baby in the face of my gentlemanly powers.” Despite her calm demeanor, a fire blazed in her eyes matching Allen’s.

Charlotte stood by, smiling tenderly. “I’m so excited to go around town with you two. I’d like to have a look in the shop with stationery and cute little trinkets... Would you mind coming with me?”

“Of course! I’d go to the ends of hell with you!” Allen declared.

“Likewise! I am prepared to accompany you on a journey through the underworld!” Gosetsu followed.

“I-It’s just an ordinary shop...” Though she was a little overwhelmed by the pair’s fiery fervor, Charlotte walked down the street with a spring in her step. Allen and Gosetsu trailed right behind her, even as they glared at each other. And so they went on, like an owner leading two rabid dogs by the reins.

Eluka and Roo were watching the trio from a short distance away when someone approached them.

“Looke here, you folks are always up to something fun, aren’t cha?”

“Hey Miach! If you’re free, wanna hang around and watch? It’ll probably be good for a laugh,” Eluka said.

“So Eluka, what happens when one of them wins?” Roo piped up.

Eluka shrugged. “They’ll get it out of their system, I guess?”

“What a waste of time.”

They watched over the trio, who were entering the shop of sundry goods: the first battleground of the day.

The shop was small and cozy, a little ways away from the main road, but it still attracted many customers with its range of rare accessories and trinkets imported from foreign countries.

Charlotte’s eyes sparkled at all the items lining the shelves. “I heard about this shop from Eluka. She told me it’s fun even just to look around...and she was right! Everything is so cute!”

“Y-You think so?” Allen replied awkwardly, looking at the ornaments she was so dazzled by. *Are they cute? They look like weird beasts to me...*

The little ornaments of various shapes all featured magical beasts—and to Allen, they looked like they were about to lunge at their prey. Maybe this was what people called “creepy-cute.” Allen stared at the items, lost in thought. As a result, Gosetsu made a move before him.

“I think something like this would suit you very well, Lady Charlotte,” she said, picking a light necklace and holding it up to her. The jewelry had a surprisingly simple motif of a cat.

“Ooh, a kitty-cat. It’s adorable!”

“Oho, isn’t it? If you’d allow me, may I present it to you as a gift to mark this special day?”

“Um, n-no, I’d feel too bad...”

“Not to worry, my dear Lady Charlotte, I do have some coins of my own. Think of it as a token of my gratitude for your daily kindness.”

Gosetsu strode up to the cashier. With such graceful moves, she was raking in those gentleman points at a dizzying speed—even Allen could see that.

Tch...! I have to give her a present too! Though being behind had him flustered, Allen carefully cast his eye over the items in the shop. He was dimly aware of the conversation going on behind him.

“Hello there. Might you be the master of the shop, sir?” Gosetsu said.

“Y-Yes, I am. May I help you...?” the owner replied, slightly confused.

“Oh, it’s just a small question.” Gosetsu gave a cheerful laugh. Allen heard the sound of some heavy object, perhaps a leather bag, being placed on the table. Then Gosetsu said, “I’m interested in buying this shop. What kind of sum would you expect for it, if I may ask?”

Even Allen couldn’t ignore what she said, and he couldn’t help but cut in. “Stop right there, you idiot!”

Gosetsu was holding a bag chock-full of gold coins, leaning in toward the owner. Allen grasped her shoulder and held her back. “Don’t you go trying to buy the whole shop like it’s nothing! Are you in your right mind?!”

“It’s the duty of a servant to respond to the wishes of one’s master at three hundred percent! If I can’t buy one or two shops for my Lady, it will be my disgrace!!!”

“What kind of servant is that?! Besides, where the hell did you get so much money?!”

“Aha, do not fear. This is clean money. I burrowed into dungeons,

defeated magical beasts, and exchanged them for money at the guild, that's all."

"I thought you were sneaking out of the house—so *that's* what you were up to?! You're a magical beast! You shouldn't earn pocket money by catching other magical beasts!"

Their squabble was heating up. It got to the point where they challenged each other to fight it out on the street—but just then, Charlotte's bright voice rang out in the air.

"Um, I have a gift for each of you."

"Huh?" The two of them turned to her in surprise.

Charlotte was holding out two objects, each wrapped with a pretty bow. For Allen, it was a fountain pen; for Gosetsu, a grooming brush. Apparently, she had quickly made the purchase while the pair were locking horns.

"I know my salary comes from Allen's pocket anyway, but...I wanted to give you something in return, since you always take such good care of me. Would you please accept it?"

"Of course...!" Allen exclaimed.

"I-I am beyond grateful..." Gosetsu murmured.

The two of them received her gifts and held them tightly against their chests like precious treasures. Though they were modest presents, coming from Charlotte, the items became priceless in their eyes. Allen and Gosetsu lingered in the unexpected bliss. But almost at exactly the same moment, they realized something and cast each other a glance.

Wait, doesn't this mean...Charlotte is actually the biggest gentleman? Allen remarked telepathically.

Indeed... I didn't expect this surprise attack... Gosetsu replied in silence.

Charlotte had secretly prepared surprise gifts for them. She was a far better gentleman than the two idiots who were squabbling in the shop. The duo swallowed hard. They sensed an unexpected storm approaching to crash the rest of their duel.

Later, when they went to a café that was popular for its pancakes, it went like this:

"Lady Charlotte, are you sure you're happy with just tea?" Gosetsu asked.

"Yes. We don't often go out like this, so I thought it'd be nice to have a long chat, just the three of us. I'd love to hear all your stories, Gosetsu."

"Ah...!" Gosetsu swooned. "My Lady is so saintly!"

And still later, when they walked up a small hill to enjoy the sunset view:

"How do you like it, Charlotte?" Allen asked. "It's beautiful, right?"

B-But, uh, I must say you're more b—"

"Yes! It's so beautiful! I hope we'll always watch sunsets like this together, for the rest of our lives."

"Ahh...! My girlfriend is so sweet!"

The day passed in much the same fashion, and night fell, drawing the curtain on the trio's peculiar date. They headed to the bar, where they'd promised to meet up with Eluka and Roo.

"Hey, welcome back," Eluka greeted them with a grin.

"Hi everyone," Charlotte said. She held out a bag for Roo. "I have a little something for you too, Roo."

"*Woo-hoo! It's jerky! Looks yum!*" Roo wagged her tail and did a little jig.

Eluka and Miach exchanged glances with a smirk.

"We stopped watching midway through, but who won in the end?" Eluka asked.

"We're betting on Gosetsu," Miach chimed in.

"Ah, I remember now. I have to make a judgment, don't I... I had so much fun I completely forgot." Charlotte mulled over it with a serious expression. But soon she knitted her brows anxiously and let out a small sigh. "They were both so lovely today... I'd hate to give them a ranking like that—"

"There's no need for that anymore," Allen interjected, following her into the bar with Gosetsu behind him. They both looked solemn. "Which one of us is the biggest gentleman...? The answer to that question is plain as day to us already. Right, Gosetsu?"

"Indeed. I must admit it is an overwhelming triumph."

"Oh, really? Who is it...?" Charlotte asked.

"Can't you see?" Allen replied.

"Yes, there's no doubt about it," Gosetsu added.

Allen and Gosetsu nodded in unison and flanked Charlotte. Each took one of her hands and held it up in the air to declare the winner.

"The winner is—by a unanimous vote—Charlotte herself," Allen announced.

"Before Lady Charlotte, we are no better than shameful, measly insects..." Gosetsu said.

"Whaaat?! Wh-Why do you say that?!" Charlotte exclaimed in shock.

"Well, didn't see that one coming," Eluka said.

"I'm not so sure I'd call it 'gentlemanliness.' Isn't that more like 'motherliness'?" Miach commented.

"*I don't really get it, but anyways, Mommy always comes out on top in our fam.*" Roo purred, snuggling up to Charlotte for her wonderful petting.



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by Fukada Sametarou

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~ ” 2

by Fukada Sametarou

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